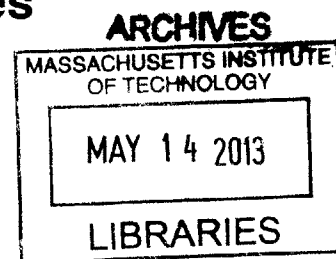


Byte-Sized TV: Writing the Web Series

By

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B.A. Theatre and History, Williams College, 2008



SUBMITTED TO THE PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES/WRITING
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ABSTRACT

Web series or “webisodes” are a transitional storytelling form bridging the production practices of broadcast television and Internet video. Shorter than most television episodes and distributed on online platforms like YouTube, web series both draw on and deviate from traditional TV storytelling strategies. In this thesis, I compare the production and storytelling strategies of “derivative” web series based on broadcast television shows with “original” web series created for the Internet, focusing on the evolution of scripted entertainment content online.

I begin by reviewing of the relevant academic literature in television studies, production studies, transmedia, and television storytelling to situate web series in a theoretical context. I then undertake an exploration of web series storytelling strategies. I compare the types of narratives told by derivative and original web series, investigating how the form has evolved to date, and which genres dominate the landscape.

Finally, I focus on web series production, using John Caldwell’s concept of “aesthetic salaries” as a lens to investigate creators’ motivations for creating online content. I look into original web series production, exploring the aspirations of creators, as well as how they measure success. I also investigate the politics involved in the production of derivative web series—particularly the tensions between guild writers and non-union marketing “creatives,” both of whom stake professional claims on web content.

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INTRODUCTION

“I don’t see myself creating another TV show,” writer/producer Joss Whedon said in 2009, shortly after the success of his web series *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*. “I’m beginning to wonder how viable the medium of television, as it’s run right now, will be a few years down the road.”¹

A passion project created during 2007–2008 Writer Guild of America (WGA) strike, *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* was partly born out of Whedon’s disillusionment with the Hollywood studio development process. Whedon hoped *Dr. Horrible* would inspire more independent productions, free from creative constraints. The project’s mission, he wrote on *Dr. Horrible’s* website, was, “To turn out a really thrilling, professionalish piece of entertainment specifically for the Internet. To show how much could be done with very little. To show the world there is another way.”²

When Whedon accepted a Creative Arts Emmy Award for *Dr. Horrible* in 2009, he reinforced his call for change. *Dr. Horrible*, he said, is “our small proof ... that things can be done differently in this business,” although he confessed in a post-win interview that he “didn’t expect to win an Emmy for something that has never been on TV.”³ The Internet, Whedon argued, was an ideal venue for creative experimentation. In interviews from 2009, Whedon frequently spoke of starting a “micro-studio,” exclusively for

¹ Qtd. in David Kushner, “Revolt of a TV Genius,” *Rolling Stone* (February 19, 2009): 38. In the interview, Whedon partly credits his frustration to the difficult development and production process of his short-lived series *Dollhouse* (FOX, 2009–2010) and the cancellation of his series *Firefly* (FOX, 2002).

² Qtd. In Brian Stelter, “For Web TV, a Handful of Hits but No Formula for Success,” *New York Times*, August 31, 2008.

³ Joss Whedon, Acceptance Speech for Outstanding Special Class—Short Format Live-Action Entertainment at the Creative Arts Emmy Awards, September 12, 2009. Available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98HJzNC3l3s>; ‘Buffy’ Creator Snags Emmy for ‘Horrible’ Idea, Weekend Edition, National Public Radio, September 20, 2008.

producing online content.⁴ The project never got off the ground. “Nobody in [Hollywood] was interested,” he told the *New York Times* in 2011.⁵

One of the best-known web series, *Dr. Horrible* has become a touchstone for scripted online content. Like many web series, *Dr. Horrible* was self-financed, its creative team initially uncompensated. Similar to many of today’s online content producers, Whedon produced *Dr. Horrible* with a group of family, friends, and frequent collaborators. “I was very interested in the idea of making things on the cheap, with the people that I love and trust,” he said.⁶

But while *Dr. Horrible* has come to become emblematic of independently financed, “do-it-yourself” web television, it was far from the typical online production. Whedon was able to fund the project to the tune of \$200,000, a budget that far outstrips most web series. *Dr. Horrible* also benefited from a blue-chip creative team and a built-in audience. Unlike many webseries, *Dr. Horrible* could build on Whedon’s name and loyal fan base, which he built while being particularly responsive to and respectful of the fans of his series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997—2001; UPN, 2001—2003) and *Angel* (The WB, 1999—2004). Whedon’s fans were so dedicated that they lobbied FOX to prevent the cancellation of the short-lived *Firefly* (FOX, 2002). When they were unsuccessful, the fans—who called themselves “browncoats” after a group of rebel fighters in the series—targeted networks UPN and SciFi in an attempt to convince them

⁴ Kushner, “Revolt of a TV Genius.”

⁵ Dave Itzkoff, “Once More, With Feeling: Joss Whedon Revists ‘Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog.’” *New York Times Arts Beat Blog*, April 18, 2011.

⁶ Qtd. in Kushner.

to pick up the *Firefly*.⁷ When it came to *Dr. Horrible*, Whedon knew how to mobilize his audience. He teased the series on his blog, priming his fans for its release by posting clips and trailers. As a result, *Dr. Horrible* was an almost immediate hit. It garnered 200,000 web visitors in the first hour it went online, crashing the servers of *drhorrible.com* and the online video streaming site Hulu. “We broke the Internet,” Whedon told his collaborators, in a one-line email.⁸

While Whedon technically created *Dr. Horrible* as an independent producer, he drew on the resources and networks at his disposal to create and promote the project—resources he had built as a prominent figure in the entertainment industry. As we shall see throughout this study, many web series creators who hope to emulate Whedon’s success lack his access. Whedon demonstrated that brand-name creatives could use the web to promote independent passion projects, but to what degree does that hold true for less-connected independent creators looking to break in to the industry?

The year Whedon won his Emmy for *Dr. Horrible*, the ceremony was hosted by Dr. Horrible himself—Neil Patrick Harris—and Whedon’s web series was the subject of a pre-recorded skit. “Television is dead,” said Harris, “hacking into” the live Emmy broadcast as his Dr. Horrible persona. “The future of home entertainment is the Internet.”⁹ While the skit went on to reassure Emmy viewers that television distribution was not only alive, but superior— “on the Internet, you can watch your shows without

⁷ For more information about *Firefly* and fan involvement, see <http://www.browncoats.com/index.php?ContentID=42e95a1f27c00>

⁸ “Dr. Horrible Speaks!” *Chicago Tribune*, July 19, 2008.

http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/2008/07/dr-horrible-spe.html.

⁹ 61st Primetime Emmy Awards, NBC, September 13, 2009. Doctor Horrible skit available online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGB0gMXynGU>.

any interruption,” says Horrible, only to be cut off by a buffering signal—it reveals clear anxiety about the future of television. “The era of TV is over,” Horrible proclaims, seconds before his nemesis, Captain Hammer (Nathan Fillion), knocks him out. In characteristic contrast to Horrible, Hammer turns out to be a TV fan. “People will always need... glossy entertainment, and Hollywood will be there to provide it. Like the Ottoman Empire, the music industry, and Zima, we’re here to stay,” he says, getting a nervous laugh from the Emmys’ on-site audience.

While the skit concludes with Horrible’s computer crashing—an assertion of television’s dominance—it also provides a clear acknowledgment that TV is under pressure. This acknowledgment is made even more significant by the venue—the Emmy Awards—historically a night when the TV industry has celebrated itself. Overall, the *Dr. Horrible* Emmy skit defines television and the Internet as adversaries, setting the two media in conflict with each other. The Internet, the skit seems to suggest, is waiting to unseat the television industry—today’s Ottoman Empire.

The Web Series

Despite the anxieties revealed by the *Dr. Horrible* Emmy skit, media transition is rarely as simple as new technologies, delivery platforms, and cultural practices supplanting old ones. Writing in 2000, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin suggest that the process of media change is more aptly described as “remediation” than “revolution”: “Not only will the new media landscape look like television as we know it,” they write, “but television will come

to look more and more like new media.”¹⁰ If any form bridges the mediums of television and the Internet, it’s the web television series or, as it has come to be known, the web series.

Web series are a transitional storytelling form influenced by the narrative strategies and production practices of broadcast television and Internet video. Shorter than most television episodes and most often distributed on online video-sharing platforms like YouTube, many web series emulate broadcast television episodes, adapting TV’s serial, scripted traditions to a new medium. Released online over a period of weeks, or even months, the majority of web series tell accretive narratives that reward audiences for repeat viewing—a storytelling form very much like episodic television.

Perhaps in an effort to distinguish web series from the episodes first aired on TV, many television shows market their online content as “webisodes,” “mobisodes,” or “minisodes,” branding web series as distinct from “regular” television episodes and perhaps undermining their claims to be television. The most popular of these terms is “webisode,” which originated with marketers in the late 1990s. In the wake of the 2007–2008 WGA strike, “webisode” began to take on legal weight. One of the key issues at stake for WGA strikers was residuals—or compensation—for content created for new media, as well as for broadcast content distributed online. The writer of an episode of television is entitled to a payment, or residual, for each airing beyond an initial

¹⁰ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 224

broadcast.¹¹ On the web, where a video can receive thousands if not millions of views, residuals become more than a little bit complicated.¹² How much is a view worth? Are all views of equal value? Is just clicking enough to count as economically valuable viewing? Can emergent Internet viewing metrics ever match up to the established television practices? “The increased fragmentation of the audience and the multiplication of delivery platforms has led to uncertainty about how much value to place on different kinds of audiences,” write Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green.¹³

As part of the agreement that ended the strike, writers received compensation guidelines for clearly defined forms of web-based work. The agreement also codified “new media productions” as a scripted story form recognized by the WGA, creating two tiers of new media productions: “original” productions such as *Dr. Horrible* were those that had been specifically created for the web. In order to be covered by WGA agreements, these original productions had to meet minimum budget requirements. “Derivative” productions were the second class of recognized work. Created to promote existing television shows, derivative web series used characters from and situations inspired by previously existing television properties.¹⁴

¹¹ Writers are entitled to residuals for network, cable, and international rebroadcasts of their work, as well as home video and online distribution. For information about residuals and a timeline of the changes to residual payments, see the Writers Guild of America, “Residuals Survival Guide,” 3–4. Available at http://www.wga.org/uploadedFiles/writers_resources/residuals/residualssurvival05.pdf.

¹² Residuals were a sore subject with the WGA. A deal struck in the 1980s before the expansion of the VHS and DVD market that lasted until 2006—set “home video” residuals for ¼ rate of “pay TV,” a rate the union felt was ridiculously low. Part of the motivation behind the strike was to avoid another “home video” debacle with online technologies. For more see Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007): 97-101.

¹³ Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2013): 116. For more information about these issues of compensation and evaluation, see Chapter 3: The Value of Media Engagement in *Spreadable Media*: 113-152.

¹⁴ Writers Guild of America. *Guide to New Media*, Revised August 2011. Available at <http://www.wga.org/uploadedfiles/contracts/newmedia11.pdf>

Classifying a production as “derivative” creates an implied hierarchy between a web series and its broadcast or cable counterpart, and such semantic hierarchies are born out by compensation. The average writer makes far less writing for the web than for television. Often this is a function of television budgets, which outpace web productions by astronomical rates largely because it is easier to make production costs back (and generate additional revenue) by selling TV advertising spots. The ad revenue that can be earned by a given TV show far exceeds the potential earnings from online advertisements. That said, advertising is hardly the only way television shows make money for networks and production companies; international distribution rights, licensing fees (increasingly to online platforms like Netflix or Amazon Prime as part of packaged content libraries), syndication, if the show is a hit and reaches a certain number of episodes, generally 100, and home DVD or video sales are also money-makers for TV series. Of these, only DVD sales or international rights (for web shows that air on proprietary sites that can’t be accessed outside of a given country) have been a real possibility for web series. Therefore, as web series can’t match the potential revenue of TV series, their budgets tend to be small when compared to traditional television productions.¹⁵

Currently, there’s a great deal of uncertainty in web series production: who is responsible for making content? What are the funding models? While there is no broad

¹⁵ The exception here proves the rule. Video streaming platform Netflix invested heavily in its marquee original online series *House of Cards*, winning a bidding war against HBO for rights to the script. But this investment makes economic sense for Netflix because the platform doesn’t depend on advertising dollars: it’s revenue is subscriber-based—and furthermore, Netflix needs to distinguish itself against rival platforms like Amazon Prime, whose library is beginning to overlap with Netflix’s significantly. Therefore, it is more important for Netflix to have an expensive “buzz-worthy” series with all the trappings of “quality” television to attract subscribers. For platforms that provide content for “free” to consumers, and depend on advertising dollars for revenue, that level of investment in content doesn’t make sense.

consensus, there is movement toward codification; in addition to the legal classifications for digital work that emerged from the 2008 WGA strike, the Writers Guild has established East and West Coast digital media caucuses for entertainment writers making a living through work distributed over the Internet. Staffed by one person each, these organizations have limited influence, primarily providing professional development resources to guild members.

As a result of these factors, derivative web series are commonly seen as second tier work, both in terms of where they fit in production hierarchies, as well as how they're received by audiences. "Webisodes are a quick fix," writes Meghan Carlson of the online fan site BuddyTV, "a small diversion that—in acting, production value, and writing—can't measure up to the real deal."¹⁶ Mike Hale of the *New York Times* echoes her sentiment. "Webisodes..." he writes, "are diverting, but none are more than diversions."¹⁷ And it is not only derivative web series that are looked down upon. The value of original web series is often measured by how closely they hew to the aesthetic codes commonly associated with broadcast television or studio-produced films. High production values thus lend legitimacy to original web productions, as do brand-name creatives. *Doctor Horrible* clearly benefited from both of those factors.

There's a positive slide to webisodes' peripheral status. Like many marginalized story forms, webisodes are a venue for underrepresented groups to tell narratives that might never find traction on "regular" TV. Webisodes' very marginal status affords their

¹⁶ Meghan Carlson, "Webisodes Cure Mid-Season Blues for 'Heroes,' 'Office' Fans," BuddyTV, December 30, 2008. <http://www.buddytv.com/articles/heroes/webisodes-cure-midseason-blues-25422.aspx>.

¹⁷ Mike Hale, "Webisodes Bridge Gaps in NBC Series," *New York Times*, December 29, 2008. www.nytimes.com/2008/12/29/arts/television/29webi.html

writers a space of narrative experimentation, both in terms of the types of stories they tell, and how those stories are told. This is true of derivative as well as original webisodes. Constrained by canons and licensing agreements, derivative webisodes exist in relation to the television show—the central creative property that *Lost* creator Damon Lindelof famously referred to as “the mothership.”¹⁸ Webisode writers have to find strategic ways to integrate their narratives into the television universe without treading on territory that has been—or could be—covered by the television show. As a result, today’s derivative webisodes occupy a liminal space between the industrially mandated “canon” of the episodic television text, and more speculative narratives previously found in fringe storytelling forms, like fan fiction and vidding.

In addition to enabling a space for narrative experimentation, webisodes provide a window into emerging production and labor practices. The “do it yourself” ethos promoted by Joss Whedon in the wake of *Dr. Horrible* animates many original webisode projects. How viable the DiY model actually is for writers who don’t have Whedon’s access, influence, or capital is one of the issues I’ll be investigating in this thesis. I’m also keenly interested in the goals and aspirations of independent content producers. As we shall see in coming chapters, few people write for the web for its own sake; most create web work in the hopes that it will serve as a stepping stone toward broadcast or feature film careers.

As a case study, web series reveal some of the ways in which television production is evolving in response to the opportunities offered by digital technologies.

¹⁸ Qtd. in Pamela Douglas, *Writing the TV Drama Series* (Los Angeles, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007): 237.

For instance, many contemporary web series have, by necessity, experimented with funding models such as crowd-funding and brand sponsorship. As we shall see in this study, each funding model requires a different set of tasks and concerns for the creators, affecting production workflows and audience reception. Distribution is another key issue. While television networks distribute derivative web series—creating a degree of separation between the creative teams who write online content and the audience that watches it—creators of original web series most often distribute their work directly to fans, whether on personal websites or video-sharing platforms like YouTube. In this way, original web series provide an example of an emerging trend—the death of the middleman. From independent film distributors to boutique record labels, middlemen are disappearing across creative industries. In their place are platforms, content aggregators, and algorithms, which serve as a new breed of curator and distributor. This shift creates challenges and opportunities for creatives who now have no option but to provide content directly to their audiences.

These direct distribution channels lend themselves to more direct communication, as well as to a new frankness about production realities, particularly funding. On crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter, creators encourage fans to take a financial stake in projects. But in return for audience goodwill, creators must be upfront about their project's budgetary realities. Creators also frame and pitch corporate sponsorship deals to fans, asserting and negotiating authenticity over social media.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Elizabeth Elcessor, "Tweeting @feliciaday: Online Social Media, Convergence, and Subcultural Stardom," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (2012): 46–66. We'll return to the case of Felicia Day in Chapter 3: Web Series Production.

Many original webisode creators are beginning to see frequent, frank, and informal communication with their audiences as an essential part of their job.

Locating Web Series

We can analyze the phenomenon of web series as a technology, as a cultural practice, and as part of a serial narrative tradition. Each of these lenses will be useful at different points throughout this thesis, and each gives the web series a different origin story.

As a technology, web series date to the Internet boom of the mid-1990s. While many contemporary original web series are animated by a participatory do-it-yourself ethos, the tools that make web series relatively easy to make today—cheap, high-quality cameras, accessible production software, and open distribution platforms—were not as readily available in the mid-1990s. Therefore, many of the first experiments with web series were run by advertising agencies with access to professional-grade skills and technology. Notable among these early web series was *The Spot* (1995–1997). Conceived as an online version of *Melrose Place* (FOX, 1992–1999), *The Spot* was initially run out of Los Angeles ad firm Fattal and Collins as a pretense to selling banner ads to blue chip clients such as Toyota. The show's initial success led to the formation of American Cybercast, a publically-traded online video company, but dwindling audiences and rapid overexpansion caused the collapse of Cybercast less than a year after it was incorporated. The company brought *The Spot* down with it.²⁰ *The Spot* is indicative of the original webisode genre throughout the 1990s. Many early webisodes

²⁰ See "Death marks The Spot," CNET News, July 1, 1997, news.cnet.com/Death-marks-The-Spot/2100-1023_3-201052.html and Mike Chwastiak, "Webisodics: A Brief History," *Getting Hooked*, July 16, 1998, sideroad.com/gethooked/column10.html

were fronted by start-up companies spun out of advertising agencies. Most of these companies collapsed after their online video offerings failed to generate enough revenue to keep them afloat.²¹

Derivative webisodes originated around the same time. *Homicide: Second Shift* (1997–1999), a web series based on *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993–1999) was one of the earliest examples. Centered, like many contemporary webisodes, on a set of characters peripheral to the broadcast TV narrative, *Homicide: Second Shift* followed the “second shift” of detectives who took over when the “first shift” of television detectives went off duty. Developed by NBC’s in-house digital division, *Second Shift* was integrated into the broadcast version of the TV narrative. *Second Shift* detectives periodically had cameos on *Homicide: Life on the Street*, and vice versa. The crossovers culminated in “Homicide.com,” a stunt episode of *Homicide: Life on the Street*. Conceived in three parts, the story began online on the *Second Shift* website, and then continued in a televised episode in which several of the *Second Shift* detectives appeared. After the resolution of the TV detectives’ storylines in the broadcast episode, viewers could log on to the *Second Shift* website to see the wrap-up for the Internet-based detectives.

Viewers accustomed to today’s web series would be surprised by the look of *Homicide: Second Shift*, which interspersed script pages with crime scene photographs and stills of actors portraying the second shift detectives.²² In a similar vein, *The Spot*

²¹ See John Geirland and Eva Sonesh-Keder Roman, *Digital Babylon: How the Geeks, the Suits, and the Ponytails Fought to Bring Hollywood to the Internet* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1999).

²² See “Detectives to Solve ‘Homicide’ Case Online and On-Air,” Microsoft Press Release, February 1, 1999. Available at <http://www.microsoft.com/en-us/news/press/1999/feb99/nbctvpr.aspx>. For style frames

featured written diary entries from its characters, as well as photographs and short video clips. The explanation for this collage-like aesthetic is straightforward: the technical limitations of 1990s Internet meant that video streaming was nearly impossible and multimedia downloads were slow.

Web series also follow out of the long-standing cultural practice of releasing narratives in serial installments. Online, this practice predates TV-inspired web episodes, but seriality, of course, predates the Internet going back at least as far as Homeric bards, who—in telling stories night after night—developed serial storytelling strategies that are visible in the surviving texts of oral formulaic poems, such as the *Odyssey*. Victorian serial novels—the most often cited of which are those by Charles Dickens—are another prototypical Western example.²³ Most relevant to the webisode is the evolution of American television seriality, which developed as part of a particular industrial regime with roots in radio.²⁴ All of the early television networks except for DuMont began as radio networks—and some popular radio serials, such as *Amos 'n' Andy*, were imported to television.²⁵ As had been the case with radio, the commercial demands of the network-programming schedule—aggregating a critical mass of

from the Homicide: Second Shift site, see Imaginary Studio, Project: Homicide Second Shift, Web Design. Available at http://www.imaginarystudio.com/low/p_nbc01.html.

²³ For more information see Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville, VA: The University of Virginia Press, 1991) and Elizabeth Minchin, "Serial Repetition in Homer and the 'Poetics of Talk': A Case Study from the *Odyssey*," *Oral Tradition* 14.2 (1999): 336-353.

²⁴ Serials were a major feature of radio programming—Michele Hilmes dates some of the earliest to Chicago. *Clara, Lu and Em* (1930–1936) started at Chicago's WGN, moved to NBC Blue the next year, before finally landing on daytime. Radio daytime serials soap operas, pitched at women, only grew in popularity in the coming decades and raised a good deal of conversation and controversy about being mass-produced or "assembly-line" narratives. For more information, see Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 108.

²⁵ Popular radio performers would occasionally also make guest appearances on television—radio personality Ruth Goldberg, for instance, appeared on *The Milton Berle Show*, further demonstrating the overlap between the mediums.

viewers, week after week, and building brand recognition—contributed to the ascendance of long-form serials on American television. While 1950s television was populated by a rich variety of non-serial formats, such as anthology, sports, and variety programs, many of which were broadcast live, more serials began to appear at the end of the decade and particularly in the 1960s as a greater number of programs were produced as pretaped shows, or “telefilms.” The move to telefilm production, as well as the increased involvement of Hollywood production companies in creating television content, opened the door for more narrative serials.²⁶ This shift laid the groundwork for modern TV serials, perhaps the type of programming most associated with television today.

At their core, television serials—like many TV programs—are industrially produced narratives. Created in a steady stream and in a standardized format, serials can be economically produced, then slotted into existing schedules. Defining seriality at large, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen’s research unit on Popular Seriality asserts that, “popular seriality [is] a form of standardization and schematization that, precisely because of its reproducibility and broad base of appeal, continually generates novel possibilities for formal and experiential variation and continuation.”²⁷ As the Göttingen researchers suggest, seriality is not just a distribution mechanism, but a narrative form with a well-developed set of aesthetic practices and pleasures. Original and derivative

²⁶ The shift to telefilm production was in part spurred by advertisers, argues Michele Hilmes, who wanted greater control over programming. For more on the reasons behind the shift to telefilm production, see Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990): 141—160 and Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994.

²⁷ Frank Kelleter and Kathleen Looch, “Research Unit – Popular Seriality: Aesthetics and Practice,” Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, <http://popularseriality.uni-goettingen.de/projects/0>

web series fit in this narrative tradition, building on the serial storytelling format that has evolved on American television and radio for nearly a century.

In the pages to come, I will compare web series storytelling strategies and production, with a focus on the narrative form as a site where the evolving relationship between different media forms plays out. Chapter One is a review of the academic literature relevant to web series. While web series themselves have been understudied, a review of scholarship in television studies, production studies, transmedia, and television narratives will help situate the form in a theoretical context.

Chapter Two is an exploration of web series storytelling strategies. I will compare the types of narratives told by derivative and original web series, investigating how the form has evolved to date, and which genres seem to dominate the landscape. While I will discuss many original and derivative web series, including *The Booth at the End* (Hulu, 2011 —) and *30 Rock's Jack Donaghy: Executive Superhero* (2011 —), I will take a particularly close look at Jane Espenson's 2009 "The Face of the Enemy" *Battlestar Galactica* webisodes. Written by a senior writer and having direct bearing on the television show's arc, this web series is remarkable as a point of deviation from the norm. I will also explore Espenson's web series *Husbands* (2011—) as an example of high-end original work, as well as a point of comparison with her derivative webisodes.

Chapter Three focuses on web series production, using John Caldwell's concept of "aesthetic salaries" as a lens to investigate creators' motivations for creating online content. I will look into original web series production, exploring the aspirations of creators, as well as how they measure success. I will also investigate the politics

involved in the production of derivative web series—particularly the tensions between guild writers and non-union marketing “creatives,” both of whom stake professional claims on web content.

This thesis will be a story of continuity, as well as change. Some web series are clearly aligned with traditional TV narratives. Others embrace a spirit more indigenous to the web. These different breeds of web series inform and influence each other. Rather than being in conflict—in the way that Dr. Horrible and Captain Hammer suggested at the 2009 Emmy Awards—television and the Internet are evolving together. The web series is one place where we can see that evolution at work. In the following pages, we will see how web series both challenge and support established entertainment industry practices. How “disruptive” are web series? Whom do they benefit? And, most critically, what do they tell us about the evolution of television storytelling and production in the digital era?

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Television Studies: TV in Transition

*The End of Television. Television after TV. The Television Will Be Revolutionized.*¹ A subgenre of academic books has emerged in the past decade, asserting (at least via title) that broadcast television is dead and new media did the deed. But beneath the veneer of technological triumphalism (or alarmism), a more nuanced narrative emerges, spearheaded by the authors and editors of these titles. “Current transformations in media delivery systems simultaneously transform and sustain familiar patterns,” Lynn Spigel writes in *Television after TV*.² “The post-network era is introducing immense changes,” asserts Amanda Lotz in *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, “...yet television remains every bit as relevant and vital a site for exploring intersections of media and culture.”³

Television is in transition; as a medium and a cultural practice, it is located on the fault lines between old and new. While “television” might not be on its deathbed, the industrial logics and cultural practices that have constituted our understanding of the medium are changing. Television content and distribution is becoming increasingly cross-platform as digital technologies unsettle the industrial “best practices” that have

¹ Elihu Katz and Paddy Scannell, eds. “The End of Television?: It’s Impact on the World (So Far),” in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* vol. 625, no. 1, September 2009; Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, eds. *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004; Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television will be Revolutionized*. New York: New York University Press, 2007.

² Spigel, “Introduction,” in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, 1. TV, as defined by Spigel, is the “technologies, industrial formations, government policies, and practices of looking” associated with television in the network era.

³ Lotz, *The Television will be Revolutionized*, 253.

shaped decades of programming and distribution. Further, audience-viewing habits are also changing, even as Americans watch more television than ever before. Even seminal theories like Raymond Williams's flow, are being reevaluated, reassessed, and, in some cases, reimagined.⁴ For instance, Derek Kompare sees the "new flow of television" as a "regime of repetition," supported by syndication and merchandizing.⁵ According to Kompare, "it is impossible to gauge exactly what 'television' will be in another decade or so. However, it is clear that the centralized, mass-disseminated cultural institution that has held sway since the middle of the twentieth century is largely ceding to a regime premised on individual choice, marked by highly diversified content, atomized reception, and malleable technologies."⁶

Although the recent changes in television production, reception, and narratives have been particularly rapid, Shawn Shimpach argues that television—like any medium—is in a state of constant evolution.⁷ Asserting that television "is and always has been in transition," Shimpach argues that shifts affect the entire media landscape—not just the television industry—and that they have spurred the development of new narrative and industrial strategies. Arguing that television distribution during the network

⁴ Flow, called the "defining characteristic of broadcasting," by Williams describes how television programs lead into each other, creating a flowing experience that encompasses and transcends individual programs. Williams presented flow as a deliberate strategy by networks to hold the viewers' attention for an entire evening. For more, see Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Fontana, 1974).

⁵ Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 215.

⁶ Derek Kompare, "Publishing Flow: DVD Box Sets and the Reconceptualization of Television," *Television and New Media* vol. 7, no. 4 (2006): 335-336.

⁷ Comprehensive overviews of TV's programming and industrial evolution can be found in Gary R. Edgerton's *The Columbia History of American Television* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) and Douglas Gomery's *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

era (1950s–1980s) depended on scarcity, Shimpach identifies a shift toward an “economy of abundance” and a “ubiquity of distribution.” Television programming is no longer just “content for broadcast,” but a “textual form disseminated across a multiplicity of viewing and institutional engagements.”⁸

Scholars like Shimpach, Kompare, and Lotz highlight the interrelation of recent changes in production (the processes by which television programs are created), television texts (the narrative content of the programs themselves), and reception (how an audience watches or “receives” a TV program). Each of these domains is a traditional area of inquiry for television scholars, and as the television industry adapts to digital technology, looking at the interrelations among these different spheres becomes even more critical.

In *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Lotz argues that many of the changes in contemporary television viewing arise from shifts in production. “Alternations in the production process—the practices involved in the creation and circulation of television—including how producers make television programs, how networks finance them, and how audiences access them,” she writes, “have created new ways of using television and now challenge our basic understanding of the medium.”⁹ Lotz wrote her study in 2007, just before the expansion of the digital distribution of television content, and, if anything, the tensions she describes have escalated, altering—likely irreversibly—television distribution and reception. The widespread availability of TV on the Internet has helped create a growing class of viewer who expects the content she wants,

⁸ Shawn Shimpach, *Television in Transition*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

⁹ Lotz, *The Television will be Revolutionized*, 3.

whenever she wants it, on any platform. "The experience of television in a post-network era fragments beyond... narrowcasting... to personcasting in terms of what is viewed, when, how and even in how viewers pay for it," Lotz wrote in 2007.¹⁰

Even as television audiences are increasingly fragmented, as per Lotz's study, many broadcast programs still rely on advertiser-supported revenue streams. Traditionally, ad-supported models have been predicated on a sizeable audience share, which supposedly translates into a sizeable number of eyeballs for any given product. In this business model, according to Jay Rosen, "attention [is] aggregated and sold as a commodity."¹¹ Two critical factors here—both identified by Rosen—are aggregation and attention. While hit shows of the early network era routinely garnered ratings of 50 or more, today a show can be considered a successful broadcast series with a rating of less than 10, and a cable hit with even smaller numbers.¹² In other words, smaller and more specialized audience groups are being aggregated. Blockbuster TV "ratings busters" are "unlikely to occur ever again," wrote Janet Staiger because "too much choice is available."¹³

In this world, attention becomes increasingly important. While there's not

¹⁰ Lotz, 244–245.

¹¹ Jay Rosen, Communications Forum at MIT, April 5, 2012, http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/journalism_internet.html.

¹² The Nielsen Company reports TV ratings in rating points and shares. A rating point is the percentage of households that own televisions watching a given program, while a share is the percentage of households with the television turned on tuned into that particular program. In a study of "blockbuster" TV in the network era, Janet Staiger charts the average ratings for the top three programs from 1950 to the mid 1990s—while the 1950s saw the biggest overall numbers with ratings in the 50s—and even in some instances, 60s—through the 1960s and 1970s, top ratings averaged in the 30s. In the 1980s and 1990s, as cable TV penetration grew, ratings slid down to into the 20s. See Janet Staiger, *Blockbuster TV: Must-See Sitcoms of the Network Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 10-15. Bill Carter, "TV Ratings Skid Continues," *New York Times*, April 19, 2012, <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/04/19/tv-ratings-skid-continues-as-big-hits-reach-new-lows/#>

¹³ Staiger, 173.

conclusive data to suggest that more “engaged” viewers are more likely to buy the products advertised in any given show, executives increasingly pitch audience investment—usually termed “engagement”—as a new metric by which to measure a show’s success. Engagement has become such a hot bench mark that even established institutions like Nielsen are struggling to incorporate social media data into their ratings algorithms.¹⁴

The emphasis on greater viewer engagement with narrative content on the reception end has caused ripples back into the production sphere. In an attempt to attract, or even create, engaged viewers, executives and producers have unrolled a host of narrative ad-ons designed to interest audiences, both during live broadcasts and in “the gap” between television episodes or seasons—a productive space where audience interest can be built and sustained (as we will see later in our discussion of *Lost*).¹⁵ In other words, shifts in distribution and reception are continuing to make waves back to the production sphere, changing the ways television stories are being manufactured. The significance of those changes is a key site of inquiry for this thesis.

While television is in a period of profound transition, many scholars, television critics, and industry professionals have argued that TV’s writers are also reaching

¹⁴ For more information, see Ivan Asquith, “TV 2.0: Turning Television into an Engagement Medium,” Submitted as a Master’s Thesis in Comparative Media Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007, <http://cms.mit.edu/research/theses/IvanAskwith2007.pdf> and Philip M. Napoli, *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ See Sean O’Sullivan, “Old, New, Borrowed, Blue: *Deadwood* and Serial Fiction,” in David Lavery, ed., *Reading Deadwood: A Western to Swear By*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2006; Derek Kompare, “Publishing Flow: DVD Box Sets and the Reconception of Television.” *Television and New Media* vol. 7, no. 4 (2006) : 335–360; Jason Mittel, “Serial Boxes.” January 2010. <http://justtv.wordpress.com/2010/01/20/serial-boxes/>

creative heights and reinvigorating decades-old narrative models by telling more “complex” serial stories than ever before.¹⁶ Although it’s easy to take issue with the term “complex”—what, after all, is “simple” television?—at the same time that contemporary programming is being lauded by cultural elites, there’s some anxiety within the entertainment industry that scripted television needs to reinvent itself to attract and keep enough viewers to make continued production economically viable. As a result, executives, producers, and writers are trying to support and promote serial television narratives through experimentation with additional content distributed through the web and mobile platforms.

Will Brooker has termed this phenomenon “overflow,” evoking the image of a television program or text—to use a term borrowed from literary studies—literally spilling over the confines of its broadcast slot to occupy multiple media platforms in various narrative forms. “The text of the TV show is no longer limited to the television medium,” he writes.¹⁷ Henry Jenkins argues that the shifts Brooker describes are a result of “media convergence,” or the “technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes in the ways media circulate in our culture.”¹⁸ Convergence “is both a top-down corporate driven process, and a bottom-up consumer driven process,” according to Jenkins,

¹⁶ Most recently, Emma Charlton, “‘Boardwalk Empire’ creator says TV has an edge,” *American Foreign Press*, April 17, 2012, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jmNWYHYWW_b00LKF2u5lRGladbkA?docId=CNG.ad24e77150ab77855bf11cb180d9dd85.181. See also Glen Creeber, *Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen*. London: BFI Publishing, 2004.

¹⁷ In coining “overflow,” Brooker is riffing on Raymond Williams’s seminal concept of televisual “flow.” See Will Brooker, “Living on *Dawson’s Creek*: Teen Viewers, Cultural Convergence, and Television Overflow,” in *The Television Studies Reader*, edited by Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (New York: Routledge, 2004), 569.

¹⁸ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 282.

enabling the circulation of media content across technological delivery platforms.¹⁹ In Jenkins's formulation, stories distributed on different media channels come together to create a singular "transmedia" text.²⁰

In effect, Jenkins "reverses Brooker's metaphor," Jonathan Gray and Lotz write. While Brooker's overflow model is predicated on the idea of an origin text—the television narrative, exploded across multiple platforms—in Jenkins' formulation, the text is a hybrid, comprised of equally-important constituent narratives located on various media delivery systems. The distinction is perhaps academic, but, as Lotz and Gray note, both formulations point to the necessity of television scholars crossing platforms with the programs they study, situating television as part of a diverse media ecology.²¹

As Television Studies with a humanities-orientation has developed as a field in the past twenty years, scholars have analyzed television programs in their broader cultural, industrial, and technological contexts, and more recent cross-platform shifts such as those identified by Brooker and Jenkins make a contextual approach even more necessary. As Lotz, Gray, Shimpach, and others have suggested, television is best understood not as a singular medium, but as a set of evolving cultural and industrial practices. Television, writes Charlotte Brunsdon, is, "a production of the complex interplay of different histories—disciplinary, national, economic, technological, and

¹⁹ Ibid, 18.

²⁰ Ibid, 20–21.

²¹ Ibid, 20–21; Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz, *Television Studies* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 136–137.

legislative—which not only did not exist until recently, but is currently, contestedly, being produced.”²²

Television programs are shaped by the institutional conditions in which they are created. Therefore, the stories told by television programs—whether hour-long episodes or the shorter webisodes that will be the focus of this study—should be analyzed alongside the particular industrial and cultural contexts from which they emerge.

Industry Studies

The growing field of industry studies—also called production studies or “critical media industry studies”—is particularly vital to this area of inquiry. Scholars like John T. Caldwell, Amanda Lotz, and Miranda J. Banks argue that film and television storytelling cannot be fully understood without taking into account the perspectives and experiences of the professionals who create it. Production studies, Vicki Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell write, takes “the lived realities of people involved in media production as the subjects for theorizing production as culture.”²³

In a 2009 article, Timothy Havens, Lotz, and Serra Tinic attempt to define “critical media industry studies,” as a corrective to high-level, wide-angle political economy views of media production, as well as textual inquiry divorced from industrial context, writing that,

We envision and propose critical media industry studies through grounded institutional case studies that examine the relationships between strategies (here read as the larger economic goals and logics of large-scale cultural industries) and tactics (the ways in which cultural workers

²² Qtd. In Gray and Lotz, 21-22.

²³ Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds. *Production Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.

seek to negotiate, and at times perhaps subvert, the constraints imposed by institutional interests to their own purposes).²⁴

In his study of media franchises, Derek Johnson has used a similar approach to develop the concept of franchised or “licensed creativity.” Writers, producers, and other creative personnel working on a media franchise are often constrained by licensing agreements, professional hierarchies, and an institutionally enforced vision of the franchise’s “canon”—or narrative history—which comes with a host of expectations about what types of stories are and are not legitimate. Although many writers create work through “textual strategies of difference” from past stories, Johnson writes, “licensed creativity [in media franchises] has continued to be valued in terms of its deference to a more canonical and legitimate original and compatibility with someone else’s use.”²⁵

Johnson’s work is vital to understanding the concept of authorship in today’s media industries, both in large franchised properties and in television shows that make use of online narrative promotions, which—like franchises—mobilize diverse creative talent in the pursuit of creating an artistic product with a singular, marketable voice. Johnson problematizes “the idea of a franchise as the expression of a single voice,” arguing that “the franchise system must be understood as a system of resources animated by the social interaction of its users, and not as a single, unified form.”²⁶

Indeed, in the post-writer’s strike workplace, Denise Mann writes, the job description for television showrunners has expanded. In addition to managing episodic series, modern showrunners like Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse of *Lost* (ABC,

²⁴ Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach,” *Communication, Culture, and Critique* 2 (2009), 247.

²⁵ Derek Johnson, *Media Franchise and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 228–230.

²⁶ Johnson, 230–231.

2004–2010) are expected to oversee a host of ancillary narrative content, including “promotional activities in order to activate fan interactivity online.”²⁷ However involved the showrunners are in these promotional activities in reality, promoting their involvement is an effective marketing strategy, Johnson has noted, elevating work that might otherwise be classed as second tier with the “privileged creators” at the center of the show.²⁸

Authorship—linked to credits and by extension, compensation—is a financial as well as a creative issue. In the context of derivative webisodes, often written by a contract worker, assistant, or junior member of a writing staff, the notion of authorship is particularly fraught. “The paradox of the media worker is that the promise of autonomy, creativity, fame, or wealth still oversupplies the labor market, allowing media industries to control the *mise-en-scène* (setting and action) of production narratives,” write Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell.²⁹

Inundated with willing aspirants, the entertainment industry—like many other artistic and cultural institutions—traffics in “symbolic payroll systems,” according to John Caldwell.³⁰ Many entertainment workers, Caldwell writes, are paid for their time and labor in artistic and cultural capital, receiving “aesthetic salaries.” Scholars, Caldwell argues, must consider “the complicated forms of *non-financial* artistic, social, and

²⁷ Denise Mann, “It’s Not TV, It’s Brand Management,” in *Production Studies*, 109—111.

²⁸ Johnson, 226. Showrunners have varying degrees of complicity and involvement in this persona-focused marketing, focused on online promotions. To provide a contrasting example Alan Ball, for instance, worked with HBO’s marketing department to write *True Blood* “minisodes” which were widely promoted as “written by Alan Ball,” while *Battlestar Galactica*’s Ron Moore has been openly dismissive of webisodes in interviews, despite the fact that he oversaw the creation of two web series at *Battlestar*.

²⁹ Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, *Production Studies*, 3–4.

³⁰ John T. Caldwell, “Para-Industry: Researching Hollywood’s Blackwaters,” *Cinema Journal*. 52, No. 3 (Spring 2013): 162..

cultural capital that are exchanged daily" to make the entertainment industry function.³¹ Caldwell's work on "symbolic payroll" will prove particularly useful when we look at the experiences of writers and producers of derivative and original webisodes—some of whom work without financial compensation, straddling the line between aspirant and entertainment professional.

Transmedia Studies

A television program's textual content is arguably as important as its industrial context, and in recent years, the "text" of television shows has expanded beyond the series itself. Scholars like Will Brooker, Henry Jenkins, Jonathan Gray, and Roberta Pearson have turned attention to the broader textual field in which television programs are created and watched.

In his 2002 study of *Dawson's Creek* (The WB, 1998–2003), Will Brooker coined the term overflow—as previously noted—to describe a cultural landscape where audiences were inundated with ancillary or narrative content related to a television program. In 2006, Henry Jenkins redefined the overflow phenomenon as a particular aesthetic form when he described it as "transmedia storytelling." According to Jenkins, transmedia storytelling is "the art of world making"; it is "a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence."³² Jenkins would later refine his definition, writing that "transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of

³¹ Ibid, 8.

³² Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 21.

creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience.”³³ According to Jenkins, transmedia is both a distribution strategy and an aesthetic form, which encourages active participation from audience members. “To fully experience any fictional world,” he writes, “consumers must assume the role of hunters and gathers, chasing down bits of story across media channels.”³⁴

Roberta Pearson compares Jenkins’s “hunters and gatherers” to cult audiences. Using *Lost* as a case study, she argues that while the show and its associated add-ons are pitched at a broad audience, they were strategically designed to encourage an intense level of engagement with the program. This engagement was further facilitated by the viewing practices enabled by time-shifting and playback technologies. In this way, *Lost* “demonstrates that with... changes to programming strategies, viewing habits, and broadcast/playback technologies... cult has been appropriated for the mainstream.”³⁵

Also using *Lost* as a case study, Ivan Asquith links the entertainment industry’s exploration of transmedia storytelling with the desire to create an “engaged” audience. “Engagement,” Asquith writes, has—rightly or wrongly— been presented within the television and advertising industries as a metric that might help buttress some of the cracks in television’s traditional advertising supported model.³⁶ In the case of *Lost*, Asquith links the creation of webisodes and other transmedia narratives ad-ons to an

³³ Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia 202: Further Reflections,” Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins, August 1, 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html.

³⁴ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 21.

³⁵ Roberta Pearson, ed. *Reading Lost*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 23. Sharon Marie Ross makes a similar argument in *Beyond The Box: Television and the Internet* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

³⁶ Asquith, “TV 2.0: Turning Television into an Engagement Medium.”

industrial desire to cultivate a more “engaged” audience, funneling viewers back to the television program.³⁷

In an idealized form of transmedia storytelling, Jenkins writes, “each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story.”³⁸ While Jenkins makes an *aesthetic* case for medium equality in *Convergence Culture*, Jennifer Gillian sees a specifically *economic* benefit to such equality. She describes a transmedia franchise as a circle with multiple entry points, constructed to attract viewers in a variety of ways, and then to funnel them to other elements in the property.³⁹ Jason Mittell, however, reminds us that medium equality is an ideal rarely realized, particularly in television transmedia. He writes,

In the high stakes industry of commercial television, the financial realities demand that the core medium of any franchise be identified and privileged, typically emphasizing the more traditional television form over newer modes of online textuality. It is useful to distinguish between Jenkins’s proposed ideal of balanced transmedia, with no one medium or text serving a primary role over others, with the more commonplace model of unbalanced transmedia, with a clearly identifiable core text and a number of peripheral transmedia extensions that might be more or less integrated into the narrative whole.⁴⁰

Mittell draws attention to the reality of transmedia storytelling in practice, in a world with limited staff, budgets, and shifting corporate priorities. His concept of “unbalanced

³⁷ Askwith, “TV 2.0”; Lindelof qtd. in Pamela Douglas, *Writing the TV Drama Series* (Los Angeles, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007): 237.

³⁸ Jenkins, “Transmedia 202: Further Reflections.”

³⁹ Jennifer Gillian, *Television and New Media: Must-Click TV* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1–25.

⁴⁰ Jason Mittell, “Transmedia Storytelling,” in *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, pre-publication edition (MediaCommons Press, 2012). Available at <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcpress/complextelevision/>. It worth noting that the perception of what the “core text” is may differ across groups of viewers. For example, let’s take two television series adapted from existing cult properties—*The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010—), based on Robert Kirkman’s comics of the same name and *True Blood* (HBO, 2008—), based on Charlaine Harris’s Southern Vampire Mysteries series. Kirkman and Harris fans (who make up a minority of the TV audience) likely perceive the originating comics and books, respectively, as the “core” text, while the majority of the audience of *The Walking Dead* and *True Blood* likely see the TV series as the “core” text. In other words, a “core” text can be relative based on the community viewing it.

transmedia” accurately describes the conditions in which most derivative webisodes are produced and distributed.

Furthermore, the overflow of television content beyond the limits of the program is not always presented in such an intentionally narrative way as the phrase “transmedia storytelling” might imply. Building on Jenkins and the work of French theorist Gerard Genette, Jonathan Gray has cast light on media paratexts—the ancillary packaging around TV series, from DVD box sets to promotional clips—arguing that they are not simply marketing devices, but potentially tools of narrative extension. In Gray’s formulation, paratexts help audiences create meaning by framing, prefiguring, and extending the experience of a text.⁴¹

Derivative webisodes straddle the space between paratext and transmedia extension, often blurring the boundary between them. Although webisodes are often written to stand alone, some only become narratively meaningful within the context of the original television show. Are webisodes a “unique contribution” to the world of the television program, or a “derivative” paratext designed to funnel viewers back to the “mothership”? Can they be both? I believe this question is best answered on a case-by-case basis, and hope that the answers we uncover will illuminate the operation of “transmedia storytelling” in practice, where creative teams comprised of people with different skill sets and priorities create narratives in workplaces defined not only by creativity, but also by professional hierarchies and material constraints.

Television Storytelling

⁴¹ Jonathan Gray, *Shows Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 23–46.

The emergence of television transmedia and cross-platform narratives has been aided not only by media convergence and technological change, but also by the evolution of a longstanding, medium-specific art form: scripted television storytelling. Scholars such as Jason Mittell and Jeffrey Sconce have attempted to understand this evolution by developing a “poetics” of American television storytelling, building on the seminal work of film scholar David Bordwell. “The poetics of any medium studies the finished work as the result of a process of construction,” asserts Bordwell. The historical poetics of cinema, he writes, seeks to answer two questions,

- 1) What are the principles according to which films are constructed and by means of which they achieve particular effects?
- 2) How and why have these principles arisen and changed in particular empirical circumstances?⁴²

Applying those questions to television, Mittell and Sconce’s work is helpful in understanding the origins of the web episode. Many webisode writers conceive of their role in relation to television writing, and are trained—in varying degrees—in creating narratives for television. The degree to which webisodes draw on, repurpose, and deviate from the storytelling strategies of contemporary American television will remain a central area of inquiry for this thesis. Understanding the development of television storytelling is a key step in understanding how webisode writers tell—and aspire to tell—stories.

American television poetics are neither uniform nor static. They have been in evolution since the introduction of the TV medium and continue to shift as we enter the

⁴² David Bordwell, “The Historical Poetics of Cinema,” in *The Cinematic Text: Methods and Approaches*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 371.

era of overflow and cross-platform narrative consumption. Storytelling trends in the past decade and a half have established the conditions for the web series to emerge and perhaps flourish, but a brief recap of the evolution of American television storytelling reveals some of the narrative tensions and factors central to the process of writing of television episodes, and, by extension, webisodes.

While the 1950s was dominated by anthology shows and variety programs, many of which were taped live, as more television series began to be prerecorded, it opened the door for more fictional, serial programming.⁴³ In the 1960s, many scripted TV shows were highly episodic (daytime soap operas, of course—many of which grew out of radio—being a notable exception). A conflict-of-the-week was introduced early and resolved by the end of the episode, never altering the fundamental premise of the show. This storytelling model gave shows a relatively low barrier to entry. Audiences didn't need a huge amount of foreknowledge to enjoy a program, and they could easily miss episodes, or watch them out of order—a relative necessity before the expansion of off-network syndication in the 1960s and home video in the 1980s.⁴⁴

Although continuing plot arcs have historically been a mainstay of radio and television soap operas, in the 1980s and 1990s, landmark primetime shows like *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981–1987), *St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982–1988), and *Twin Peaks*

⁴³ For more information on the shift to telefilm production, see Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994 and Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

⁴⁴ For more on syndication, see Kompare, *Rerun Nation*. For a fuller descriptions of this history, see Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000; Robert J. Thompson, "Preface," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, eds. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), xvii-xx; David Bianculli, "Quality TV: A U.S. Critics Perspective," in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, eds. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 35–37.

(ABC, 1990–1991) pioneered the use of heightened seriality—or plot lines and character arcs that continued across multiple weeks. According to Robert J. Thompson, when *E.R.* (NBC, 1994–2009) and *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993–2005) broke into the top ratings in the 1990s, the trappings of what he terms “quality TV,” which includes heightened seriality, “spread like a virus.”⁴⁵ Shows not usually recognized as “quality TV” because of their genre, such as *Babylon 5* (PTEN, 1994–1998; TNT, 1998) and *Deep Space 9* (UPN, 1993–1999), also pioneered heightened seriality. In the mid-to-late 1990s, series like *The X-Files* (FOX, 1993–2002) and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2001–2003) balanced season or series-long arcs with more self-contained episodes featuring the monster, or moral, of the week.

Accretive, serial narratives have come into particular vogue in the past decade among shows that have aspirations to being “quality TV.” Series from *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) to *Lost* to *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009–) depend on the ability of viewers to remember plot lines from week to week, as well as a familiarity with character and emotional accretion. While situation comedies are still the most likely genre to press the reset button at the end of an episode (regardless of how often Liz Lemon realizes she has to step outside her comfort zone at the end of a *30 Rock* [NBC, 2006–2013] episode, chances are she will still be a neurotic wreck at the beginning of the next), sitcoms are nevertheless thoughtful in the way they treat and accrete character.⁴⁶ Some

⁴⁵ Robert J. Thompson, “Preface,” in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, eds. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), xvii.

⁴⁶ Careful character accretion in situation comedies is not a new phenomenon, dating back to the MTM and Norman Lear productions of the 1970s, with roots even earlier. For instance, Ralph Cramdon’s frustration and rage in *The Honeymooners* (DuMont, 1955–1956), while not specifically linked between episodes, can be seen as a powerful touchstone and influence on later programs, particularly *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971–1979).

sitcoms have experimented with heightened seriality. For instance, the elaborate arcs and inside jokes that define sitcoms like *Arrested Development* (FOX, 2003–2006), *Community* (NBC, 2009–) and *30 Rock* depend on seriality, and an audience well-versed in earlier episodes.⁴⁷

While shows that tend toward the episodic often remain rooted in a particular premise or situation (for instance, Darrin’s wife is a witch)—many contemporary television storytellers seem to revel in reinventing their series. David Chase (*The Sopranos*) routinely killed central characters, shaking up Tony Soprano’s life with the shifting cast. Matthew Weiner (*Mad Men*, AMC, 2007–) has reinvented protagonist Don Draper personally and professionally several times over the course of *Mad Men*’s run. Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa (*Homeland*, Showtime, 2011–) recently jettisoned the central conceit of *Homeland*’s first season—CIA agent Carrie Mathewson’s (Claire Danes) cat-and-mouse surveillance of POW turned terrorist Nicholas Brody (Damien Lewis)—by bringing Brody into the fold of the CIA. *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008) perhaps did this more profoundly; in tackling different issues, showrunner David Simon built a premise-shift into each new season, bringing in new characters and settings with the change in theme.

“Where the lines between serial and episode narratives used to be firmly drawn, today such boundaries are blurred,” writes Jason Mittell. “What was once a risky innovative device, like subjective narration or jumbled chronology, is now almost

⁴⁷ While both *Arrested Development* and *Community* have devoted fan bases—whose repeat viewing is rewarded by the intricate inside jokes—the fact that both series have struggled to find an audience on broadcast—suggests that it might be more difficult for sitcoms (particularly network sitcoms) to deploy this strategy than cable dramas (e.g. *The Sopranos*) or cable genre shows (e.g. *The Walking Dead*), both of which have delivered record ratings for their respective networks.

cliché.”⁴⁸ Mittell argues that viewers have come to expect narrative complexity. Like Pearson, he believes that these intricate narratives encourage heightened attention, watching, and rewatching. In short, such narratives foster the heightened viewer “engagement” that many network executives and television producers seem to hope to cultivate in their audiences.⁴⁹

Derivative web series spring out of this new approach to narrative. Not only are they created to support the intricate narratives in serial TV texts, the casual “almost cliché” complexity Mittell identifies in episodic television is also visible in some web series. *The Walking Dead: Torn Apart* (AMC, 2011)—winner of the Writer’s Guild of America’s inaugural award in derivative webisode writing—jumps around in time, and is only revealed in the sixth and final installment to be an extended flashback. Many webisodes—from *The Office’s The Accountants* (NBC, 2006) to *True Blood’s A Drop of True Blood* (HBO, 2010)—are point-of-view pieces, offering viewers a subjective perspective on the television shows’ events. That being said, the truncated palate of the web series (most are less than 10 minutes) doesn’t leave a lot of room for meaningful narrative maneuvering. As we shall see in the following chapter, some of the web series that try to replicate the heightened “complex” plot-based seriality typified by series like

⁴⁸ Mittell, “Introduction,” *Complex TV*.

⁴⁹ Arguably, the case of *Arrested Development*, which struggled to find an audience on FOX, suggests that heightened seriality could also lead to viewer alienation in some cases. Mittell cites the pilot episode of the popular series *Revenge* (ABC, 2011—), which opens with a flashback sequence, as an example of how widespread “complex” narrative features are. That being said, the most popular shows from a ratings standpoint—multi-camera sitcoms (e.g. *Two and a Half Men*), procedurals (*NCIS*), reality and variety programming (*The Voice*)—aren’t densely plotted serials with “quality TV” pretensions. A&E’s recent ratings blockbuster *Duck Dynasty* (2012—), for instance, doesn’t have a great deal of narrative “complexity” as Mittell would define it, but it does offer watchable characters and sitcom-format humor. Privileging complicated plots over other serial pleasures perhaps puts too much importance on a particular thread of television programming that is actually part of a more complex TV landscape.

Lost fall short, while some of the most successful and pleasurable web series—such as Jane Espenson and Brad Bell’s *Husbands*—exploit traditional, and perhaps, “simple” storytelling strategies.

As web series often are part of larger narrative universes, audience memory and narrative accretion are also key elements to consider. Television has traditionally fostered an “accretive intimacy,” David Thorburn explains, “between characters and audience.” Audience members who watch long-running shows spend months or even years with characters, watching the actors age and characters change. The viewers’ accretive knowledge of the show and its characters can inform and deepen an audience’s understanding of the unfolding story.⁵⁰ Jeffrey Sconce makes similar points, writing,

The cultivation of [television’s] story worlds (diegesis) is as crucial an element in its success as is storytelling. What television lacks in spectacle and narrative constraints, it makes up for in depth and duration of character relations, diegetic expansion, and audience investment. A commercial series that succeeds in the U.S. system ends up generating hundreds of hours of programming, allowing for a sophisticated and complex elaboration of character and story world.”⁵¹

Web series not only elaborate established worlds, they provide an opportunity for character accretion. Whether these stories can stand on their own without deep foreknowledge of the television text on the viewer’s part is a question this thesis will take up. While web series are an outgrowth of heightened seriality, many are highly episodic, stand alones—illuminating particular events or characters.

⁵⁰ David Thorburn, “The Sopranos,” in *The Essential HBO Reader*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 67.

⁵¹ Jeffrey Sconce, “What If? Charting Television’s New Textual Boundaries,” *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 95.

Sconce also tracks the evolution of “conjectural storytelling” in American television—highlighting episodes that ask “what if?” and “drop realist frames.”⁵² Mittell makes a similar move in his analysis of television transmedia narratives. Classing online promotions into forensically-driven stories that tell viewers “what is,” and speculative narratives that engage audiences in asking “what if?,” Mittell sees more potential for the web genre in the latter category.

Are web series an emerging storytelling genre or a marketing ploy? While only time will tell, investigating how webisodes tell stories, and how these stories relate to the broadcast television shows they promote may give us a view into how entertainment writing is evolving to fit new formats, distribution platforms, and audience viewing habits. The editors of *FlowTV* define television not as a “uniform object,” but as a “nodal point around which we can chart the movements of a shifting media culture.”⁵³ Illuminating changes in textual and industrial practices, webisode production and storytelling offer a rich test case for tracking these shifts.

⁵² Ibid, 110.

⁵³ “Introduction,” in *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, edited by Michael Kackman, Marnie Binfield, Matthew Thomas Payne, Allison Perlman, and Bryan Sebok (New York: Routledge, 2011), 10.

Chapter 2: Web Series Storytelling

Two Minutes to Cliffhanger

Original Web Dramas

We've seen this story a hundred times: a couple has a whirlwind courtship. Ties the knot impulsively. Sometimes this happens in Vegas, other times Paris, but the end result is always the same: once married, our impulsive lovebirds have to learn to live with each other. The odd-couple newlywed story has fueled many a romantic comedy, its fair share of sitcoms, and now, a web series: in Jane Espenson and Brad Bell's *Husbands* (2011–), a professional baseball player elopes with a tabloid celebrity. The only twist? They're gay.

Husbands is instantly recognizable to an audience familiar with newlywed sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–1957) and *Mad About You* (NBC, 1992–1999), while still being—due to the protagonists' sexuality—intentionally different from those precursor shows. I'll discuss *Husbands*—one of the best examples of original web series—in depth later in this chapter, but I bring it up here because it illuminates two of the key principles in this discussion of web series storytelling. *Husbands* is a recognizable story, written in the style of the quintessential newlywed sitcom. The familiar narrative allows it to exist in 2-minute chunks—writers Bell and Espenson don't have to overload on exposition. Familiar with the genre, the audience can fill in gaps and anticipate key conflicts. In this sense, *Husbands*'s writers deploy a *strategy of familiarity*, drawing on their audience's prior knowledge of television stories to execute their own successfully. But *Husbands*, unlike many classic newlywed sitcoms of the

past, centers on a gay couple.¹ This is a *strategy of difference* that sets the story apart from others in the genre, serving both as an effective marketing hook (necessary for an original, independent web series that has to attract viewers to survive), as well as a way to expand an arguably tired genre into fresh territory. In developing this concept of strategies of difference, I'm influenced by Derek Johnson, who argues that creativity in media franchises has "depended both on the recognition of other sites of creativity and the ability to diverge from it. Creative identity has emerged when the multiplication of production can be made meaningful through difference."² For original web series like *Husbands*, the originating television genre (in this case, the newlywed sitcom) provides the inspiration for Johnson's creative difference. As we will see, many derivative web series deploy creative strategies of difference to distinguish themselves from the television shows that they are based on.

In this chapter, I will explore the storytelling strategies used by original and derivative web series creators. While a handful of "how-to" books have been published on web series creation and some film schools have begun to incorporate classes or units on webisode production, web series storytelling hasn't yet been codified in a

¹ In addition to drawing on the tradition of newlywed sitcoms, *Husbands* is also influenced by a two-decade history of gay-themed programming. Ron Becker dates the explosion to the 1990s, arguing that while "television virtually denied the existence of homosexuality" in its first four decades, between 1994 and 1997, "well over 40 percent of all prime-time network series produced at least one gay-themed episode; nineteen network shows debuted with recurring gay characters; and hit shows like *Roseanne*, *Friends*, and *NYPD Blue* (to name a few) seemed to include gay jokes and references to homosexuality each week." The shift became even more explicit on cable in the 2000s. Networks like Showtime attempted to target gay "niche" viewers through programs like *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005) and *The L Word* (2004–2009), both hour-long dramas. Logo, an LGBT-themed channel, launched in 2005 and has periodically produced original, scripted programming, such as the half-hour dramedy *Noah's Arc* (Logo, 2005–2006). See Ron Becker, *Gay TV and Straight America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006): 3.

² Derek Johnson, *Media Franchise and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013), 228.

formal or comprehensive way.³ Nevertheless, some recognizable trends have begun to emerge. I will highlight how web series writers draw on strategies of familiarity—telling stories an audience has likely heard before and thus lessening the burden of exposition—as well as strategies of difference—distinguishing the web series from prior texts and genres, including, in the case of many derivative web series, the TV shows they are based on. In both instances, web series are in conversation with an abstracted “body” or “canon” of television storytelling, with which web series writers assume an audience’s familiarity. The audience’s knowledge of TV enables a creative departure from it, and in this way, some web series writers are pushing classic television genres in new and surprising directions.

Today’s original web series are shorter than their television counterparts. Bite-sized episodes averaging between two and ten minute add up to “seasons” totaling less than an hour. Episodes of nine of the ten series nominated for best comedy and drama in the 2012 Streamy Awards—one of the highest honors in Internet video—range between three and 11 minutes.⁴ L. Meghan Pierce and Tang Tang’s study of the

³ How-to books include Marie Drennan, Yuri Baranovsky, and Vlad Baranovsky, *Scriptwriting 2.0: Writing for the Digital Age* (Scottsdale, AZ: Holcomb Hathaway, 2012), Ross Brown, *Byte Sized Television: Create Your Own Series for the Internet* (Studio City, CA: Michael Weise Productions, 2011), and Dan Williams, *Web TV Series: How to Make and Market Them* (Chicago, IL: Oldcastle Books, 2013). The University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts recently launched a course on web series writing and production, making it one of the first film schools to do so; see The USC Course Catalog (<http://catalogue.usc.edu/schools/cinema/courses-ctwr/>) for more information.

⁴ The outlier in terms of length is Streamy-nominated drama series *Halo 4: Forward Unto Dawn* (Stewart Hendler, 2012). Created by Microsoft Studios and 343 Industries as a prequel to the best-selling *Halo* franchise (Microsoft Studio, 2001—), *Halo 4*’s episodes range from two to 19 minutes, a running time nearly double all other Streamy-nominated web series. Created as a promotion for the video game and drawing on an extant story world, *Halo 4* is an exceptional series in both form and content. For more information, see <http://www.youtube.com/show/halo4forwarduntodawn>.

inaugural 2010 Streamys found that the average length for episodes of nominated web series was 6.71 minutes.⁵

While many contemporary web series episodes are short by broadcast standards, length is by no means an essential or defining feature of web video. Joss Whedon's web series *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* (2008) ran in 14-minute installments. Episodes of *The Burg* (2006–2008), a popular web sitcom satirizing a group of Brooklyn hipsters, ranged from 15 to 25 minutes, usually hitting the standard network comedy length of 22 minutes. *Burg* creator Thom Woodley said the running time was no accident—he had “television ambitions” and created the series to shop around to networks.⁶

Yet, short-form episodes are so dominant today that web series creators with similar aspirations often follow a different tactic than Woodley did. Contemporary web series creators release bite-sized episodes online that, taken together, total a full-length network or cable episode. For instance, the eleven two-minute “episodes” of the first season of *Husbands*, widely rumored to be intended as a backdoor pilot, add up to the standard network comedy of 22 minutes. Furthermore, *Husband's* “second season” is a classically-structured 22-minute sitcom episode that just happens to be split into three seven-and-a-half minute “web episodes.”⁷

⁵ L. Meghan Pierce and Tang Tang, “Refashioning Television: Business Opportunities and Challenges of Webisodes,” *International Journal of Business and Social Science* (Vol. 3, No. 13; July 2012): 166.

⁶ Thom Woodley, interview by author, February 7, 2013.

⁷ *Husbands*' second season features an array of cameos, which serve to bolster its TV aspirations by populating the show with faces familiar to a television audience, as well as actors likely to bring viewers along with them. Notable cameos include writer/producer Joss Whedon—in a rare turn as an actor—and Jon Cryer (*Two and a Half Men*). While Cryer lends mainstream sitcom credibility to *Husbands*, Whedon would likely bring a niche group of fans that likely overlaps with Espenson's—given her work on Whedon's series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, and *Firefly*.

Woodley credits the popularity of YouTube as a key factor in the dominance of short-form episodes. In 2006, just months after its launch, YouTube instituted an upper limit of 10 minutes per clip—a policy that has today been increased to 15 minutes for general users.⁸ Shorter clips seemed to work better on YouTube, said Woodley, noting that his team hosted *The Burg* on its own site. As YouTube became a primary venue for viewing video clips, web series tended to get shorter, and entertainment industry wisdom held that web audiences wouldn't tune in for much longer than a few minutes. Woodley intended for *The All for Nots* (2008–2009), his follow up web series to *The Burg*, to run network sitcom length, but Michael Eisner's Vuguru, the production company he partnered with, insisted he trim each episode to a web-friendly eight minutes.⁹

Today, YouTube continues to be the dominant delivery platform for web series. The company has encouraged this with its original channel initiative; in 2011, YouTube and its parent company Google invested \$100 million in creating hundreds of “channels” full of original web-native content. The channels—generally targeted at niche audiences—range from “WWE Fan Nation,” pitched at wrestling fans, to actress Felicia Day's “Geek and Sundry,” providing entertaining “eccentricities” for self-identified geeks.¹⁰ YouTube's investment funded an array of web series, including whole channels focused on original scripted content. YouTube's example demonstrates that original web series storytelling strategies are shaped not only by writers, but also by delivery platforms. Today, many creators write for YouTube presentation—crafting short,

⁸ Brian Morrissey, “Old Media Faces a Hard Lesson on Sharing,” *Adweek* 47, 14 (April 3, 2006): 10.

⁹ Thom Woodley, interview by author, February 7, 2013.

¹⁰ For further information, see Geek & Sundry at <http://geekandsundry.com/>

digestible episodes with cliffhangers designed to entice audience members into clicking on the next segment.

The current bias toward short-form storytelling has influenced the specific types of narratives that are beginning to emerge in web series. The most successful online shows deploy strategies of familiarity, combining high-concept premises with small casts and immediately recognizable situations.¹¹ These shows draw on classic TV scenarios, archetypal characters and well-known genres such as the sitcom. In doing so, they alleviate the burden of exposition that is often too much for short narratives to bear. The 2012 Streamy Award nominees for best comedy series provide prototypical examples of these tactics at work; nominee *Burning Love* is a parody of *The Bachelor* (ABC, 2002–), and viewers familiar with that show, or reality television in general, can immediately recognize the character types and plot twists being lampooned. *The Lizzie Bennett Diaries* retells Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* as heroine Elizabeth Bennett's video blog; its chief narrative pleasure is that it is a beat-by-beat retelling of a familiar story. Series *MyMusic* and *Prison Pals* are derivative sitcom workplace documentaries in the style of *The Office* (NBC, 2005–2013) and *Parks and Recreation*

¹¹ If web series can attract a “known” actor, it goes a long way toward branding the show and building an audience. “Name” actors like Brent Spiner (*Star Trek: The Next Generation* [First run syndication, 1987–1994]) have helmed web series, and the most popular episode of Spiner's series *Fresh Hell* (2011) features a cameo from his *Star Trek* cast mate LeVar Burton—showing that even cameos from known performers can help attract views. Web series are also beginning to mint homegrown celebrities—actress Mary Kate Wiles is one such example, appearing in web series *Asst: The Web Series* (2011), *Squaresville* (2012—), *School of Thrones* (2013—) *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012—) and its spinoff *The Lydia Bennett!!* (2012—). The Streamy Awards supports this homegrown celebrity-making, awarding a prize for the web series “personality of the year,” for which Wiles was nominated in 2013.

(NBC, 2009–), with character archetypes and plot complications borrowed from network TV.¹²

The dominance of short-form episodes has created an online environment where it is easier for sketch comedy to succeed. Sketch, as Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins note, is an atomized form.¹³ Retreading a single joke or building to a punch line, sketch comedy is almost ideally designed for bite-sized consumption, and it continues to make up the bulk of the most popular scripted web videos. The FunnyorDie sketch talk show *Between Two Ferns With Zach Galifianakis* routinely gets several million views—benefiting no doubt from Galifianakis’s name recognition and the draw of watching his celebrity guests squirm.¹⁴ *Drunk History*, a web series in which celebrities like Zooey Deschanel and Ryan Gosling reenact famous historical events as recounted by an inebriated narrator, also draws views in the low millions across various platforms, as does the 2012 Streamy-nominated sketch series *Smosh*.¹⁵ Conversely, the most popular non-sketch web comedy series tend to get YouTube views in the low hundred thousands—respectable for independent creators seeking exposure, but hardly as “spreadable” as standalone sketch comedy. The bias toward comedy is so pronounced that *Hollywood Reporter* critic Andrew Wallenstein generalized that “99.9% of short form

¹² See <http://www.streamys.org/> for more information.

¹³ Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, “Golden Era and Blind Spots: Genre, History, and Comedy,” in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York: Routledge, 1995): 352.

¹⁴ “Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis,” *FunnyorDie*, http://www.funnyordie.com/between_two_ferns.

¹⁵ “Drunk History,” *FunnyorDie*, <http://www.funnyordie.com/drunkhistory>; “Smosh,” YouTube Channel: Smosh.com, <http://www.youtube.com/user/smosh>.

Internet videos” are comedy.¹⁶ Some creators have even gone so far as to assert that drama can’t work online. “You have to be insane to do this,” joked producer Jon Avnet in 2012, upon the launch of his YouTube channel WIGS, focusing on scripted drama. “Obviously, we’re not of the right mind.”¹⁷

Several original web series creators have tried to distinguish themselves by attempting to create breakout dramatic web series. Christopher Kubalisk, creator of the 2012 Streamy-nominated *The Booth at the End* (2010–), explained the series’ genesis: “I wanted to make something so cool for the Internet that people would have to show up and take notice.... When everybody’s making movies about giant robots, go make a movie about a mouse, and then you’ll stand out. And in a world where everyone in town was telling me that comedy is the only thing that’s made for the Internet, I said, ahhh, but if I make a drama and it’s good, people will notice.”¹⁸ Marrying two-character, dialogue-heavy drama in the style of *In Treatment* (HBO, 2008–2010) with science fiction elements, *The Booth at the End* centers on “The Man,” an enigmatic figure played by an engaging Xander Berkeley. Each of the series’ 2-minute episodes is a conversation between The Man and a second character, whom he always receives in the diner booth referenced in the series’ title.¹⁹

¹⁶ Andrew Wallenstein, “Online Series Has Drama, Lacks Staying Power,” National Public Radio, <http://m.npr.org/story/6619297>.

¹⁷ Kristen Acuna, “First Look- WIGS: The YouTube Channel that Will Change How We Watch TV,” *The Business Insider*, <http://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-wigs-channel-2012-5?op=1#ixzz2KcUszlwp>.

¹⁸ Mindy Peterman, “An Interview with The Booth at the End’s Christopher Kubalisk,” *The Morton Report*, <http://www.themortonreport.com/entertainment/television/an-interview-with-the-booth-at-the-end-s-christopher-kubalisk/>.

¹⁹ *The Booth at the End*’s first season premiered on Canadian website City.tv as 67 two-minute episodes. The same content was repackaged for U.S. distribution on Hulu into a season of seven half-hour episodes with regular commercial breaks, a standard network television format.

Budgetary constraints shaped the series' narrative form. *The Booth at the End's* scaled-down format—a single location, each episode consisting only of dialogue between seated two actors—was a conscious choice by Kubalisk. “I was designing [the series] from the outside in,” he said.

I had certain rules that I wanted to work from. I wanted it to depend on actors rather than cinematic language, so that it would be less expensive than having to move a camera around to different locations or having to set up one shot after another.... How big a story could I put into a very small space was my challenge.... I thought, how about I just get two guys: one person who wants something from somebody else, and the other person wants something from that other character... and that's when I began teasing out the basic structure of the show.²⁰

The series has no special effects budget—its magical and science fiction elements emerge solely from dialogue and situational suspense. While *The Man's* visitors change with each episode, the general scenario remains the same: the visitors bring *The Man* seemingly impossible requests—asking for his help in curing a family member with terminal cancer, for instance, or restoring the memory of a loved one stricken by Alzheimer's disease. *The Man* promises to grant the visitors' wishes if they perform difficult and seemingly unrelated tasks—such as robbing a bank or kidnapping a child. *The Man* reads these tasks from a mysterious leather-bound volume he carries, known as “*The Book*.” He asks that the visitors return and report on their progress, giving the series its continuing storylines and a degree of forward momentum. As *The Booth at the End* progresses, seriality slowly builds as the visitors' stories begin to overlap, and *The Man* starts a flirtation with a diner waitress named Doris, revealing a softer side to his character.

²⁰ David R. Perry, “Interview: *The Booth at the End* Creator Christopher Kubasik,” *BlogCritics Video*, <http://blogcritics.org/video/article/interview-the-booth-at-the-end/>.

From its nameless central character to the mysterious tasks, *The Booth at the*

End is enigmatic by design, a fact that Kubalisk freely acknowledges:

I try to engage online with people because I think that's part of the world we live in now. And so I was watching the arguments and discussions, with all these theories about who The Man is and how it works. He's not magic; he is magic. He's God; he's the Devil. He's a therapist with extreme measures. All these great things were being floated, and my manager reminded me that I said years ago when I was working on *The Booth*, I said, "The Internet is for arguing, and I want a show that will create arguments." So the ambiguity about The Man and The Book, and who he is, and how he relates to the other characters, who Doris is, and how they're connected or not connected—all these things, I wanted to leave a lot of room for the audience to play. The same way that a movie like *Inception* leaves a lot of room—it's a big sandbox—for people to go play in, I wanted to create a space like that for the audience with this show as well. To start answering questions is to take away the sandbox.²¹

Kubalisk's uses ambiguity as a storytelling device in an attempt to increase audience investment in the show. This tactic is clear from the series' first episode, during which The Man speaks to his client James. As the scene opens, a visibly shaken James sits across from The Man, who asks if he's "chosen a girl." The viewer has never seen The Man or James before, let alone a "girl," so this line is designed to pique the viewer's curiosity by raising a number of questions. James describes visiting a park and selecting a 4-year-old in a "dress with yellow flowers" wearing "little sandals"—visual details intended to help the audience imagine the child he describes.²²

When The Man asks, "Why her?" James replies, "She hasn't lived that long. Maybe her parents wouldn't miss her as much." As soon as James says that line, ominous music starts, hammering home the obvious point that he intends to harm the child they're discussing. The scene then takes an unexpected turn, as a stricken James says,

James

²¹ Perry, "Interview: The Booth at the End Creator Christopher Kubasik," *BlogCritics Video*, <http://blogcritics.org/video/article/interview-the-booth-at-the-end/>.

²² "The Booth at the End- Start. See What Happens," *Hulu*, <http://www.hulu.com/watch/257155>.

The hospital said my son's cancer is in remission. The hospital said that.

The Man
Well, that's good news.

James
So if I do this thing, my son will live?

The Man
That's the deal, James.²³

Cut to black. The reference to “a deal” has (ideally) raised viewers’ curiosity to a point where they will click on to the next episode, where a conversation between The Man and Jenny, a first-time visitor, reveals the exposition viewers need in order to better understand the scene with James—that the man grants wishes in exchange for making his clients do, in Jenny’s words, “horrible things.”²⁴ This exposition sets up a whole host of new questions, namely the ones that drive the series’ overall arc—who is the man and what is the scope of his powers? The third episode raises even more questions as the episodic storylines begin to overlap—The Man assigns his client Willem to protect the girl he told James to murder—inviting viewers to wonder what The Man is trying to achieve, adding a new twist on his character. Seriality in *The Booth at the End* builds slowly—questions are raised not only as plot events unfold, but also as The Man’s character slowly accretes—each client providing an opportunity to showcase different dimensions of his character.

But where do all these dimensions lead? Throughout *The Booth at the End*, The Man’s goals are deliberately obscure. That is, over the course of the first season and into the second, the series reveals little about The Man’s feelings, background, or

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

objectives, attempting to build viewer interest through raising a seemingly never-ending chain of questions that hint toward a half-baked mythology. Ambiguity in *The Booth at the End* is calculated—a tool intended to increase audience investment. Questions are privileged over answers. This isn't inherently a bad thing, but there's an emotional hollowness at the center of *The Booth at the End* that also seems to plague more conventionally distributed shows that privilege serpentine, deliberately enigmatic plots.

JJ Abrams' much-quoted "mystery box" TED talk epitomizes this contemporary school of question-driven storytelling—in it, Abrams compares narratives to "mystery boxes," identifying the question as one of the chief pleasure of storytelling.²⁵ Series like *Lost* (co-created by Abrams, who had limited involvement after the pilot) arguably carried the mystery box mantra to the extreme, perhaps at expense of other serial pleasures, such as character accretion and emotional continuity.²⁶ Geoffrey Long argues that many transmedia stories like *Lost* build moments of "negative capability" into the narrative—or "strategic gaps" that "evoke a delicious sense of 'uncertainty, mystery, or doubt.'" Negative capability, Long writes, is a major force driving viewers to the next installment of a dispersed narrative.²⁷ While "negative capability" is doubtlessly a byproduct of compelling storytelling, privileging it as a primary narrative goal may have

²⁵ That said, Abrams notes that it's also vital to ground mysteries in character arcs and emotional truth. See JJ Abrams, "The Mystery Box," *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, http://www.ted.com/talks/j_j_abrams_mystery_box.html and Frank Bruni, "JJ Abrams is a Crowd Teaser," *New York Times Magazine*, May 26, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/29/magazine/filmmaker-j-j-abrams-is-a-crowd-teaser.html>.

²⁶ Ivan Askwith explores *Lost* fans' frustrations with this phenomena—and the creators' responses—in his article "Do You Even Know Where This Is Going? *Lost* Viewers and Narrative Premeditation," in *Reading Lost*, ed. Roberta Pearson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009): 157-180.

²⁷ Geoffrey Long, "Transmedia Storytelling: Business, Aesthetics and Production at the Jim Henson Company," 53-60. See <http://cms.mit.edu/research/theses/GeoffreyLong2007.pdf>.

handicapped some *Lost*-inspired series like *The Booth at the End*, where extended mystery-box plots take precedence over the content of individual episodes.

Henry Jenkins identifies "the twin logics of seriality" as *chunking*, or "the creation of meaningful bits which cohere in any given chapter" and *dispersal*, or "the shifting of interests and attention onto what is coming next through cliff-hangers and enigmas."²⁸ Following Jenkins's model, I'd argue that series like *The Booth at the End* and *Lost* privilege dispersal over chunking, when the two should ideally be in balance. In directing attention toward *what* is to come, the series' present moment can be filled with so many gaps as to be narratively unsatisfying. Furthermore, the emphasis on "what" is coming as opposed to who, how, and why privileges plot over character, tone, emotional accretion, and the other various elements that work together to create balanced (and, I'd argue, satisfying) serial narratives.

In using overwrought ambiguity as a storytelling crutch, *The Booth at the End* is far from alone, particularly among dramatic web series. In fact, calculated confusion is one of the defining narrative features of many of today's dramatic web series. The difficulty of crafting effective short-form, serial drama undoubtedly contributes to this issue. Short series like *The Booth at the End* simply don't have the time to build dramatic momentum that rings emotionally true. Questions and cliffhangers become a stopgap for story—theoretically enticing viewers to click onto the next clip.

Short form web series *RUNAWAYS* (2012—) also falls into the trap of stringing its audience along. Created by the producers of *One Tree Hill* (The WB, 2003–2006;

²⁸ Henry Jenkins, "Making My Peace with The Bicycle Girl: Reflections on the Walking Dead Web Series," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, October 24, 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/2011/10/a_conversation_about_transmedi.html.

The CW, 2006–2012), *RUNAWAYS* adapts the “rich kids behaving badly” approach to teen drama epitomized by *Gossip Girl* (The CW, 2007–2012) and *Pretty Little Liars* (ABC Family, 2010–) for the web. A 2012 Streamy nominee for best dramatic series, *RUNAWAYS* begins with the discovery of a dead body. While the onscreen characters see the corpse’s face, the audience doesn’t get a view at it—raising the question of who has been murdered, why, and whether the murder was linked to the disappearance of the titular runaways, Mason and Kaylee. Like the protagonists of many web series, these runaways are instantly recognizable types; they’re star-crossed teenaged lovers—he’s from the wrong side of the tracks, she’s a rich princess. Each of *RUNAWAYS*’s three-to-five-minute episodes hurtles toward a cliffhanger built to provoke viewers to click on the next installment. The final episode of the season grudgingly reveals the identity of the victim (Kaylee’s father), but not why he was killed, who did it, or where the runaways have gone—all questions that the show’s creators promise will be revealed next season. Extreme viewer drop off rates—the show lost 77 percent of its viewership over the course of the 7-part series—suggest that string-along storytelling techniques are not enough to carry a web series, at least in this particular case.²⁹

Series in the model of *The Booth at the End* and *RUNAWAYS* privilege viewer engagement over substantive storytelling. Due to the limited storytelling space in which to generate dramatic momentum or build conflict and character, these series rely on delayed answers to give their seasons forward momentum. Because of the necessity of

²⁹ As of February 2013, *RUNAWAYS* had 338,058 views of its first episode, while only 79,297 views of its seventh and last. For more information see <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLjbbwHkJGe5ny3L8GMB4Vvjh1LBWErXd3>.

enticing viewers to watch the next clip and the limited time in which to tell a story, deferred gratification masquerades as drama. At their worst, these series can read as thin, extended whodunits, building dramatic tension around a single reveal. A famous example is the 2006 dramatic web series *Sam Has 7 Friends*.

More stunt than story, *Sam Has 7 Friends* premiered on August 18, 2006, revealing in the first episode that protagonist Samantha Breslow would be murdered on December 15, 2006 and that one of her seven friends would do it. Minute-and-a-half episodes were released daily, each one bringing Sam closer to her eventual death and implicating one or another of her friends in the murder. In the final episode (the 80th of the series), Sam was indeed murdered, but her killer's face wasn't seen. The creators promised that the perpetrator would be revealed in a second season, which was never made. After a distribution deal was sealed with the CW.com, *Sam Has 7 Friends* was pulled from the Internet, but unauthorized copies of the series have been posted to YouTube.³⁰ The clips have generated a host of angry comments, such as "I adored this show, but they pissed a lot of us off when they didn't finish it,"³¹ or "PQ [*Prom Queen*, the creators' subsequent web series] and this show leave everything hanging! It's exhausting" and "Waste of my life. I totally don't understand this show at all."³²

While a reliance on cliffhangers may garner some views, it comes at the expense of substantial—and I would argue, satisfying—storytelling. In 2007, *Battlestar Galactica*

³⁰ Danielle Turchiano, "The CW has Acquired Vuguru's Prom Queen, available online now," Examiner, <http://www.examiner.com/article/the-cw-has-acquired-vuguru-s-prom-queen-available-online-now>.

³¹ Sam Has 7 Friends – Ep. 1 – Lust," YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAAdgW9KIg0&list=UUfN4YdhsK1yRp51zEaaFCIw>

³² "Sam Has 7 Friends – Ep. 80 – Requiem," YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kES6_w8iDUY&list=UUfN4YdhsK1yRp51zEaaFCIw&index=1.

creator Ron Moore told *Television Week*, “The two-minute webisode is a very strange beast. Two minutes to cliffhanger. I don’t know if webisodes are going to be around long term.”³³ Moore’s critique still resonates, six years later. The failure of original dramatic web series to gain traction with viewers, especially when compared to their comedic counterparts, can be linked, at least in part, to the difficulty of successfully building the dramatic tension that can propel a serial narrative within the constraints of the short form.

High-Concept Storytelling

Original Web Dramas

While many web dramas struggle to build and maintain dramatic momentum, shows like *The Booth at the End* and the 2012 Streamy-nominated drama series *Lauren* have successfully used strategies of familiarity—namely, high-concept, recognizable situations—to generate emotional intensity in a short amount of time.

The Booth at the End’s opening episode is designed for maximum shock value—The Man and James, as previously noted, begin by discussing the murder of a 4-year-old before moving on to a child suffering from cancer. As derivative and emotionally manipulative as these plot devices are, they may also be—on some level—a necessity of short-form storytelling. The children-in-danger scenario doesn’t require extended exposition for viewers to understand the emotional stakes. It’s immediately understandable—a facile shortcut to horror.

³³ James Hibberd, “NBC Finds Webisode Workaround,” *Television Week* 26, 13, March 26, 2007. Moore’s assertion was a political point, in addition to being a creative condemnation—he was speaking in the lead-up to the 2007–2008 Writer’s Guild of America strike, after *Battlestar Galactica*’s writers has gone on a partial work stoppage focused on web series, in protest for unpaid work writing short webisodes for the show.

Over the course of the two-minute episode, Kubalisk shapes the shortcuts into an emotional reversal. First, he invites the viewer's hatred for James the would-be child-murderer, then compassion for James the dutiful parent. Both incarnations of James are archetypes—clichés even—and while their combination in a single character gestures toward complexity, it falls short of the nuanced characterizations possible in dramas with more time to tell their stories.

The episode's two-minute cap forces *The Booth at the End* to rely on rote plot devices that serve as emotional shorthand. Two minutes leaves little time for both escalation and nuance. Kubalisk only has space to grab the audience's attention, ramp up the emotional stakes, and raise questions that invite a click-through to the next episode. Relying on familiar characters and situations makes it easier to achieve all those goals in a short period of time. Kubalisk simply doesn't have room to give a fresh or revealing twist on the characters.

A reliance on high-concept, high-stakes premises is also apparent in the YouTube channel WIGS, one of the web's most commercially successful outlets for original dramatic series.³⁴ WIGS is an acronym for "Where it Gets..." with the final word changing for each of the channel's 20 series or short films, almost all of which feature dramatic content. Founded by director Rodrigo Garcia (*In Treatment*) and producer Jon Avnet (*Black Swan*), WIGS has been YouTube's top scripted channel since its launch in May 2012. The channel tells stories about women and is intended for female viewers; production has a fast pace, with new episodes premiering three times a week.

³⁴ WIGS is the top YouTube channel for scripted dramas; as of March 2013, WIGS series have collectively garnered more than 22 million views since the channel's launch in May 2012. See "Digital All-Stars," *Back Stage* 54.11 (March 14, 2013): 19.

While *The Booth at the End* primarily generates continuing viewer interest through deferred gratification—raising questions and dangling answers in an attempt to keep people watching—WIGS's series go straight for the emotional jugular. WIGS is able to generate dramatic intensity in bite-sized chunks because of familiar high-concept, high-drama premises that essentially explain themselves before the series begins. For instance, WIGS series *Lauren* is about a female sergeant attempting to report her rape to unsympathetic superiors. *Blue* is the story of single mom who works as an escort to make ends meet. *Serena* focuses on a woman in love with a Catholic priest. *Mary* is an emergency room doctor who must treat her twin sister.³⁵ Like classic American made-for-TV movies of the network era, WIGS series deploy understandable high-concept premises with built-in conflict.³⁶ These premises have the capability not only to entice viewers, but also to allow them to hit the ground running as soon as they click on the episode. Viewers can comprehend a situation without needing a lot of exposition.

A three part series of ten-minute episodes, *Lauren* provides a prototypical example of these tactics at work. The series goes for an emotional punch in its opening moments as U.S. Army Sergeant Lauren Weil (Troian Bellisario), describes her gang

³⁵ See *WIGS*, <http://www.watchwigs.com/>.

³⁶ "If you can't define [a TV movie] in a television log line, how can you get an audience to it?" Deanne Barkley, vice president of television movies for ABC and NBC told sociologist Todd Gitlin in 1981. Brandon Stoddard, head of ABC TV amplified her point. "The most important thing for a television movie is the capacity for a movie to be understood by an audience after watching a ten-second film clip." See Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994): 159-160. More information on high-concept premises and made-for-TV movies is available in Gary Edgerton, "High Concept, Small Screen: Reperciving the Industrial and Stylistic Origins of the American Made-for-TV Movie," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 19, 3 (Fall 1991): 114—127 and Douglas Gomery, "Television, Hollywood, and the Development of Movies Made for Television." In *Regarding Television*, ed. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983): 120—127.

rape by fellow officers in wrenching, graphic detail to her unsympathetic superior (Jennifer Beals). Soon after she describes the attack, the camera touches on a file of photographs of Weil's bruised and wounded body, presumably taken following the assault.³⁷

The presentation is not subtle, and like *The Booth at the End*, it's emotionally manipulative. While both of these factors could be considered shortcomings, they do succeed in giving *Lauren* instant dramatic energy. The high-stakes situation invites audience sympathy and investment in characters that we've barely had time to know. Limited by budget to a single location with two characters talking, and limited by time to ten minutes, *Lauren* builds dramatic momentum by focusing on the characters' emotional upheavals. The situation, instantly horrifying, enables a high emotional pitch that gives the drama energy. The series may not be original or subtle, but it succeeds as an emotional and intense drama because of a total commitment to the high-stakes premise. It's not great art, but at least it's affective.

Short-Form Sitcoms

Original Web Comedies

While the web still lacks a "breakout" original drama series, there is no inherent reason that serial dramatic content can't work on the online. But, as we have seen, the bias toward short-form episodes has made the task of creating scripted web dramas more difficult for storytellers, forcing an overreliance, as previously noted, on strategies of familiarity or drawn-out whodunits that build dramatic tension around a single reveal.

³⁷ "Lauren," *YouTube Channel: WIGS*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKYfdO5LFDs>.

While it is possible that web dramas could succeed if they were the length of traditional television productions, longer-form drama series are beyond the budget and time of most independent web creators.

Original comedic series have had far more success. *Hollywood Reporter* editor Andrew Wallenstein posited that the reason is because while in comedy “a punch line can be compressed without losing its impact,” in drama, “it takes a substantially longer time to get hooked on a story.”³⁸ Comedy’s ability to survive compression seems key to its online success. Less successful web comedies like the Streamy-nominated *MyMusic* fail to strategically use compressed storytelling techniques, while top-notch web comedies use the stripped down form to their advantage—the first season of Jane Espenson and Brad Bell’s *Husbands* providing a key case in point.

MyMusic is a derivative workplace mocumentary in the style of reali-coms like *The Office* (NBC, 2005–2013). The web series takes place at an alternative music magazine staffed by familiar types: the incompetent boss (Adam Busch, in hipster drag), the perky blonde social media maven (Grace Heibig), and the now-requisite crew of quirky misfits (on *MyMusic*, there are six—including the prickly death metal guy, the over-excited raver girl, as well as the series’ only characters of color).³⁹ All eight of these characters are listed in the show’s opening credits, and the series creators struggle to incorporate them into storylines—a difficulty compounded by the fact that each episode is only five minutes long. The audience is expected to have a familiarity with the characters that is difficult to cultivate in such short, over-packed segments. The

³⁸ Wallenstein, “Online Series Has Drama, Lacks Staying Power,” National Public Radio, <http://m.npr.org/story/6619297>.

³⁹ “MyMusic: The Experience,” *YouTube Channel: MyMusic*, <http://www.youtube.com/user/MyMusicShow>.

expansive cast becomes *MyMusic*'s Achilles heel—the characters are familiar sitcom figures that are never given the screen-time to rise beyond cliché, which limits their comic impact.

But *Husbands* takes the same issue of compression and turns it into a virtue.⁴⁰ The first season introduces only three characters, all of whom are fixated on a single conflict. This strategy of limitation sets *Husbands* apart from overpacked web comedies like *MyMusic*, allowing it to succeed. In general, *Husbands*, co-created by TV writer Jane Espenson (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Once Upon a Time*) and YouTube personality Brad Bell (better known by his stage name “Cheeks”) plays to the strengths of the webisode genre, always writing to the stripped-down storytelling form. While the first season’s 11 two-minute episodes add up to a standard 22-minute sitcom, *Husbands* is a uniquely online story, with a fast pace and narrow scope designed to play to the strengths of the short-form digital serial.

Husbands opens in the near future. After celebrating the nation-wide legalization of gay marriage in Las Vegas, out celebrities Cheeks (series co-creator Brad Bell) and Brady Kelly (Sean Hemeon, believable as a professional baseball player) wake up hungover and married. Deciding that a quickie divorce could “look so bad for the cause” of gay rights, in the words of Kelly, the two decide to make a go of it.⁴¹ Deploying a strategy of familiarity, the series relies on a high-concept premise with built-in conflict—exploring the consequences of a quickie Vegas marriage. “If we weren’t gay, this would

⁴⁰ “Watch Husbands,” *Husbands*, <http://husbandstheseries.com/>.

⁴¹ “Husbands: Being Britney!” YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFGex2l8jeA>.

be a hackneyed premise,” says one of the husbands in episode three, winking at the audience.⁴²

One of the series’s greatest virtues is that each episode ends mid-conflict at the point of escalation, often hammering the finish home with a scene-ending “button line,” or catchy zinger.⁴³ For instance, *Husbands*’s first episode finishes with Brady and Cheeks discovering that they’re married. Cheeks delivers the button line in a flash-forward interview: “It was totes planned. For real”—just as we’ve seen clear evidence that their marriage was anything but intentional. The second episode closes as the couple discovers that their marriage has gone public and, thanks to an embarrassing drunken viral video, is a top national news story. In the episode’s final seconds, Cheeks reads a headline about their marriage:

Cheeks
Is that how you spell travesty?

Brady
Yeah.

Cheeks
Are you sure?

Brady
I won a spelling bee once.

Cheeks
Really? So much to learn about each other.⁴⁴

Cheeks’s button line not only works as a punchline, it also hammers home the all-too-obvious point that the couple barely knows each other. Thus, there is good reason to watch more, not just for laughs but because one intuits that the characters will be

⁴² “Husbands: Being Britney!,” YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFGex2l8jeA>.

⁴³ A classic example of a button line is the famous “I’ll have what she’s having,” in *When Harry Met Sally* (Reiner, 1989).

⁴⁴ “Husbands: We Can’t Be Married,” YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWB86eY5dXw>.

developed over time. Throughout *Husbands*, button lines end scenes with a laugh, while still calling back to the central underlying problem of the segment. In doing so, they invite engagement in ongoing conflict, and by extension, the next installment. The button lines feel like a more natural enticement to continue viewing than like overused cliffhangers; they grow organically out of the scene, serving both as a capstone of prior material, a hint toward what is to come, and, often, an expression of character.

Now with a second season complete and hints of a third in the works, *Husbands* has established itself as an of-the-moment spin on the classic newlywed sitcom. "We're setting this in a world that has marriage equality, i.e a world that makes sense," said Espenson. "Once you get over that, it's *Mad About You*, but we get to tell some stories [*Mad About You*'s writers] would tell, and some stories that are unique to our situation."⁴⁵ While *Husbands* may tread some of the same territory as *Mad About You* (NBC, 1992–1999), it doesn't do it in the same way. Wisely, Espenson, and Bell limit the scale and scope of the storytelling, particularly in the first season. "You can't afford to change locations or add other actors to the scene," said Espenson, commenting on writing *Husbands* with the web in mind.⁴⁶ The financial constraints serve the smaller palette of the short-form stories; each episode of the first season takes place in a single location, and while many web comedies have large casts that are difficult to keep track of, Espenson and Bell limit themselves to three characters—the titular husbands and Cheeks's best friend, Hayley (Alessandra Torresani)—who drops in mid-season to give the two leads a quirky foil to play off of. The two-minute web episodes all have a limited

⁴⁵ "Interview with Jane Espenson," *Streaming Garage*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ShDSeA1qJE>.

⁴⁶ Jenelle Riley, "Wedded Bliss," *Back Stage* 52, 50 (December 15–20, 2011), 11.

scope: each focuses on a single conflict—where Brady and Cheeks will live, for instance, or how to cope with negative press about their marriage. The episode ends with the conflict either resolved, or more often, escalating into an even bigger issue.

Although the web episodes that make up *Husbands*'s first season add up to an episode of television, the sum total of the scenes doesn't have the same feel as typical modern sitcom, and it's not just because of the reduced scope (fewer actors and locations). Each episode covers a conflict between a combination of Cheeks, Brady, and Hayley, but taken together, they don't really build into the "A plot"/"B plot" structure—parallel storylines kicked off by particular incidents—used by many modern sitcoms. While most of the episodes in *Husbands*'s first season pick up where the last left off, they are all "stand alone" in the sense that they focus on a distinct conflict. The season as a whole brings the marriage between the men from an ill-conceived surprise to reality, ending with them living under the same roof, but it achieves this through a series of entertaining stand-alone moments that build on each other without uniting into a neat sitcom plot. This narrative freedom allows the plot of *Husbands*'s first season to indulge in dips and diversions that might not be possible in a television sitcom—Cheeks and Brady spend an episode arguing about what breed of dog they should get, for instance, or Hayley pitches the idea that she could be their life coach. The short, fractured form gives Espenson and Bell more narrative freedom, and the ability to highlight small moments that might not contribute to a larger "plot." That freedom is fair game on today's web series, but would be difficult to find in most conventional television narratives.

By contrast, *Husbands*'s second season is more conventional in its narrative tactics than the first, telling a story in the classic TV model. It's essentially a standard 22-minute sitcom episode sliced into three seven-and-a-half minute parts, which correspond to the three commercial breaks that structure many contemporary network and cable sitcoms. "Magazine-format advertising requires story construction that can be interrupted, and the practicalities of maintaining audiences require writers to manufacture plots with points of climax before the prescribed commercial breaks," writes Amanda Lotz.⁴⁷ The three-act sitcom has been institutionalized, while hour-long dramas have historically been told in four acts (some networks have recently upped the number of mandated act breaks to five or six to allow for more commercials).⁴⁸ The web episodes of *Husbands*'s second season break where a television sitcom would cut to commercial, giving it the pacing and rhythm of a conventional three-act TV episode.

Husbands's web budget is still apparent in the second season's reliance on a single filming location—except for brief cutaways, most of the action stays at Brady and Cheeks's home—but the world of the series is greatly expanded. In fact, the cast nearly triples in size. While Espenson and Bell wisely keep the story's focus on the relationship between Brady and Cheeks, Brady gets a best friend (Mekhi Phifer) to balance out Cheek's Hayley, and the outside world intrudes in the form of Brady's agent Wes (Joss Whedon, in a cameo performance) and newscaster Vic Del Ray (Jon Cryer of *Two and a Half Men*). These new faces are further supplemented by bit players. The expanded world may be an attempt to demonstrate that the *Husbands* concept has the legs to

⁴⁷ Amanda Lotz, *The Television will be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007): 174.

⁴⁸ For more on act breaks, see Pamela Douglas, *Writing the TV Drama Series*, Los Angeles, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007.

sustain a TV series—an aspiration hinted at by Bell and Espenson in a 2011 interview kicking off the series' first season, but whatever the reason, the expanded scope succeeds in making the second season of *Husbands* feel—while no less entertaining or skillfully made—less uniquely web-native than the first.⁴⁹

Beyond the act breaks, the story of *Husbands*'s second season is essentially a classically-structured sitcom episode. Espenson and Bell introduce a problem: Cheeks is too “out” and flamboyant for Brady's audience of conservative baseball fans. Cheeks and Brady attempt to solve this problem, in the face of a series of escalating complications. In the final web episode of the season (corresponding to the sitcom's third act), both men come to a realization that their relationship is more important than public opinion—the typical “learning moment” that caps off many mainstream contemporary sitcom episodes.⁵⁰ *Husbands*'s second season could easily air on television as a single episode, with commercials inserted into the act breaks.

⁴⁹ “Interview with Jane Espenson,” *Streaming Garage*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ShDSeA1qJE>.

⁵⁰ While the “learning moment” characterizes mainstream network sitcoms such as *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009—) and *Mike and Molly* (CBS, 2010—), it is by no means universal. Edgier network sitcoms like *Scrubs* (NBC, 2001—2008; ABC, 2009—2010) and *Arrested Development* (FOX, 2003—2006; Netflix, 2013—) parody the learning moment, while still drawing on it for emotional dividends, while many cable sitcoms explicitly reject the learning moment—examples include *Party Down* (Starz, 2009—2010), *Archer* (FX, 2009—), and *Veep* (HBO, 2012—), which reliably ends with its protagonist stooping to a new level of moral degradation, in a sort of anti-learning moment. In a 2000 interview with IFP/West, showrunner Alan Ball—whose credits include *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001—2005), *True Blood* (HBO, 2008—), and the Academy Award winning script for *American Beauty* (Sam Mendes, 1999)—expressed the frustration he had with the learning moment while he was a writer for the Chuck Lorre sitcom *Cybill* (CBS, 1995—1998): “I was in a really angry state of mind when I was writing [*American Beauty*], because on *Cybill* we had what we called ‘a moment of shit’ every week where somebody learns something—and usually from *Cybill*—and they hug and this sappy music comes on. You know, after three years of that, I would just cringe. And so when I got off on my own, it's like, ‘Yeah, the kids go to jail! Nothing means anything. Truth is irrelevant, ha!’” Ball's comment perhaps illuminates part of the reason that so many writers of post-network shows have rejected what was once a learning moment mandate. That being said—there may not be so much of a difference between “mainstream” sitcoms that embrace the learning moment and “edgy” ones that parody or reject it—the key to most sitcoms is that the characters never actually learn, and are eternally doomed to repeat their mistakes in the next episode. Learning moments, even in the most conventional shows, are reassuring fakes when viewed against the totality of the show's run. For

Whether it remains on the web or jumps to TV, *Husbands* sends a clear message that short-form web sitcoms work best on a small scale. Both the first and second seasons are instructive; the first season deploys economic storytelling techniques and a small cast, making for enjoyable bite-sized episodes, while the second season fits the amount of story that would fill a single episode of television into a three-part “season.” *MyMusic*, by contrast, tries to fit that much narrative into a single five-minute episode—introducing a typical-sitcom complication at the start of each installment, and attempting to resolve it at breakneck speed while including each member of the enormous cast. *Husbands* succeeds because it doesn’t try to do too much. A sitcom “is like a haiku,” said Chuck Lorre, creator of hit sitcoms *Two and a Half Men* (CBS, 2003—), *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007—), and *Mike and Molly* (CBS, 2010—). “It’s very simple and very structured.”⁵¹ Bill Prady, co-creator of *The Big Bang Theory*, agreed. “If you’re going to fill [a sitcom] with plot, with events that must occur, there’s no room for people to talk.” He said that the amount of incidents in a given *Big Bang Theory* scene was always either “one or zero.”⁵²

In *Husbands*, Espenson and Bell demonstrate the value of economic storytelling, as well as leaving room for people to talk. Ultimately, the series hinges on the believability of the relationship between Cheeks and Brady, which despite *Husbands*’s campy, tongue-in-cheek tone, is treated with emotional honesty. According to Bell,

more from Alan Ball, see “American Beauty Screenwriter Alan Ball Conducts Case Study at the IFP/West Screenwriters Conference,” *Inside Film Magazine*, March 18-19, 2000, http://www.insidefilm.com/alan_ball.html.

⁵¹ Tom Bissell, “A Simple Medium,” *The New Yorker* 86. 39 (December 6, 2010): 37.

⁵² *Ibid.*

Cheeks was a character I've played for a number of years [on YouTube], but I've never given him any emotional backbone. He was always flighty, superficial, and silly. And suddenly, we had to have these moments of realism where I had to be emotionally authentic about something. Finding that, without it being too black and white—like, here I am being silly and here I am being honest—how do I do that? How do you write that? How does that come out in your performance? That was a big challenge for me.⁵³

It's precisely because the series doesn't try to do too much that it has time for moments of emotional honesty. In some ways, this is a great strength of the scripted format—Bell's previous work as Cheeks was improvised sketch comedy. The script provides scaffolding for moments of emotional depth, giving *Husbands* a decided edge over other kinds of online serial narratives; the show's creators slowly earn the ability to invite audience members to root for the relationship at the center of the show. "It's a romantic comedy," says Espenson. "In *Will and Grace* the romantic comedy was in quotes and it was between Will and Grace." Although *Will and Grace* featured gay couples, the real "romance" at the heart of the series was the straight friendship between Will and Grace. "Our show," Espenson continues, "has moved on to make the romance where the romance would actually be," in other words, between the same-sex couple.⁵⁴

Whether a show centered on a gay romance would be possible on network television is another question. Espenson seems hopeful. "The audience that watches *Glee* (FOX, 2009—) and *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009—) is ready for this show," she said in a 2011 interview.⁵⁵ However, *Husbands* takes a more cynical tone than either of these programs. In a scene in the series's second season, Brady attempts to convince Cheeks to be less affectionate in public in order to appease his conservative fans:

Brady

⁵³ "Interview with Jane Espenson," *Streaming Garage*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ShDSeA1qJE>.

⁵⁴ "Interview with Jane Espenson," *Streaming Garage*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ShDSeA1qJE>.

⁵⁵ "Interview with Jane Espenson," *Streaming Garage*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ShDSeA1qJE>.

People don't want to think about our sex life.

Cheeks

I could show you a few fanfic forums.

Brady

On the Internet. But I play baseball on TV. And TV gays, they sing about acceptance or host daytime talk shows for housewives. Or acquire babies from exotic locations like China or wombs.

Cheeks

That is so not me. You've met me, right?⁵⁶

Television, the scene seems to suggest, is still uncharted territory for an unapologetically physically and emotionally affectionate gay couple—yet, arguably, that's territory Bell and Espenson are beginning to chart by packaging Cheeks and Brady in a classic and recognizable sitcom format.

Borrowing Depth

Derivative Webisode Storytelling

Up until the 2007–2008 Writer's Guild of America (WGA) strike, the production of webisodes supporting television episodes tended to be exceptional.⁵⁷ A major factor in the scarcity of web series was disagreement between the networks and the WGA over workflows and compensation for online content creation. Before the WGA strike, writes John Caldwell,

Nonunion creative workers began to enter traditional union workplaces and perform work similar to the unionized "creatives." Studios justified these newcomers as specialists in "online" platforms, website design, and multimedia fan initiatives. Yet these newcomers were writing scripts (for mobisodes), developing media (for portable screens), and producing content defended as mere "marketing." This excuse did not cut it with either the writers at NBC/ABC or the WGA,

⁵⁶ "Husbands: Appropriate is Not the Word," YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddJeWtQBIGs>.

⁵⁷ NBC Universal was the exception with early web series *The Office: The Accountants* (2006) and *Battlestar Galactica: The Resistance* (2006) but the network eventually provoked a WGA work stoppage in early 2007 because it had been commissioning web episodes as promotional content rolled into existing episode orders—the result of that being that writers received no additional compensation for additional work. For more information see Hibberd, "NBC Finds Webisode Workaround," *Television Week* 26, 13, March 26, 2007.

which pulled the plug to stop the opportunistic conflation of marketing activities and screen content production.⁵⁸

Denise Mann has noted that a rhetorical shift took place during the WGA strike where—in order to justify receiving residual payments for broadcast television shows or theatrical films distributed online (a major issue fueling the strike)—writers started referring to work created for the web as “content,” as opposed to “hype” or “promotional material.” This shift was an attempt to place the promotional web work Caldwell describes under the purview of writing teams, not marketing departments. In this way, the WGA rhetorically aligned online promotions like webisodes with established artistic “content” such as the television show itself, accepting responsibility for creating online scripted promotional content as a byproduct of the fight to gain web residuals.⁵⁹

Although these issues were ostensibly resolved with the establishment of WGA rates for online work, a great deal of online “promotional” content continues to be created by marketing departments or as work-for-hire from outside vendors, establishing—in Caldwell’s words—a non-union “shadow production workspace.” In the post-strike environment, the struggles over new media work and compensation are ongoing. For instance, the WGA launched a “Writer’s Guild 2.0” initiative in the wake of the strike, providing a pathway to membership for independent original web series creators. In 2011, the Writer’s Guild of America awarded its inaugural prize for webisode

⁵⁸ John T. Caldwell, “Breaking Ranks: Backdoor Workforces, Messy Workflows, and Craft Disaggregation,” *Popular Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2010): 222.

⁵⁹ Denise Mann, “It’s Not TV, It’s Brand Management,” in *Production Studies*, Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 109–111. Another key issue in the strike—the push to make reality show story editors eligible for WGA membership—was dropped in favor of concessions on the web. To date, most reality show story workers lack the benefits and basic pay requirements ensured by WGA contracts. See Ron Gover, “The Writers Guild is Losing Ground,” *Business Week Online* (December 13, 2007): 1 and “Picket line, not catwalk, at Top Model,” *USA Today*, August 10, 2006, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2006-08-10-reality-tv-strike_x.htm

writing—which can be read as another attempt to brand scripted web content as the work of guild writers. Today, as Jason Mittell has observed, it is more remarkable for a television series not to have supplementary web content, than to have it.⁶⁰ Whether or not guild writers created those series is another matter—the webisode Mittell names as one of the most “complex” examples of the genre, *Breaking Bad’s Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.*, was produced by a digital design agency as work-for-hire.⁶¹

Perhaps because of the emergent “shadow production workspace” for online content, web episodes are commonly viewed as second-tier work among WGA writers, a perspective demonstrated (intentionally or not) by their official classification by the guild as “derivative” content. Although the name may have initially arisen to make a convenient distinction (“derivative” as opposed to “original” web series that aren’t based on extant television programs), it betrays the low status derivative webisodes currently have in industry workplaces. Although webisodes were claimed by WGA leaders as “content” during the strike, many guild writers still don’t want to work on them, viewing web series as a distraction from television scripts, which bring bigger paychecks and audiences. Often, derivative web series are created by the most junior members of a writing team or writers’ and producers’ assistants who are themselves aspiring writers. As we will see in the following chapter, these assistants often view web scripts as stepping-stones toward a WGA membership and more lucrative, respected work on television.

⁶⁰ “Transmedia Storytelling,” in Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, pre-publication edition (MediaCommons Press, 2012).

⁶¹ The firm is the LA-based agency Wildfire. “Breaking Bad Gets Animated With a Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E. minisode,” *AMC.TV Blogs*, <http://blogs.amctv.com/breaking-bad/2010/03/team-science-minisode.php>.

The storytelling strategies deployed by derivative webisode creators are shaped by their second-tier status, and the attendant production constraints. Constrained by canons and licensing agreements, derivative webisodes exist in relation to the television show. Webisode writers have to find strategic ways to integrate their narratives into the television universe without treading on territory that has been (or could be) covered by the show. Webisode writers have to balance the difficult double mandate of supporting a show's brand identity—e.g. recognizably being part of the same story universe—while creating a story that in no way interferes with the narrative arcs, or potential narrative arcs, that could be explored by the team steering “the mothership.” Johnson has called this process franchised or licensed creativity. In his study of the *Star Trek* and *Battlestar Galactica* franchises, Johnson writes, “licensed creativity [in media franchises] has continued to be valued in terms of its deference to a more canonical and legitimate original and compatibility with someone else's use.”⁶²

Limited budget is a further constraint on webisode production. A television show's star actors—often the most expensive and the least available performers—generally don't appear in web series. Scheduling with any actors can be a struggle. *Battlestar Galactica*'s 10-part “Face of the Enemy” web series was originally written with the expectation of actresses Trisha Helfer (Cylon Number 6) and Grace Park (Cylon Number 8) being available. The script had to be rewritten without Number 6 when Helfer had scheduling conflicts.⁶³

⁶² Johnson, *Media Franchise and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, 228-230.

⁶³ Jane Espenson, “Webisode #1 (Enhanced)”, Syfy.com, <http://www.syfy.com/videos/Battlestar%20Galactica/Webisodes>. This problem is hardly an isolated incident. In the same webisode series, a scripted romantic relationship between Felix Gaeta (Alessandro

The exception to this rule is animated webisodes—voice acting being relatively easy, painless, and quick compared to a day (or several days) of shooting. Examples of leads appearing in animated webisodes include Alec Baldwin in *Jack Donaghy: Executive Superhero* (30 Rock, NBC, 2006–) and Aaron Paul in *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.* (*Breaking Bad*, AMC, 2008–). Amy Poehler's Leslie Knope even has a voice cameo in the *Parks and Recreation* (NBC, 2009–) web series *April and Andy's Roadtrip*, appearing in one webisode in a recorded phone conversation.

These two production constraints—the industrial mandate to tell stories that won't be covered by the series, and the unavailability of actors that portray a show's central characters—have made webisodes a place of narrative experimentation. While enough narrative elements must remain consistent with a TV series to keep webisodes a recognizable element of their home franchise, through webisodes, writers can deploy strategies of difference, experimenting with tone, focus, or even, genre.

Animated series have a particular degree of leeway and narrative freedom, since they're already visually distinct from the television text, and perhaps because they are—like webisodes themselves—a devalued form. For instance, as Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison have argued, cartoons have historically been “a degraded genre” on American television, considered to be a less serious storytelling space than live action.⁶⁴ Perhaps because of their similar degraded status, webisodes in general, and animated webisodes in particular, have the freedom to make departures from a TV series'

Juliani) and Noel “Nacho” Allison (Sebastian Spence) was changed to a relationship between Gaeta and Louis Hochi (Brad Dryborough) after it became clear that Spence had other commitments.

⁶⁴ Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison, “Prime-Time Animation: An Overview,” in *Prime Time Animation: Television Animation and American Culture*, eds. Carol A. Stabile and Mark Harrison (New York: Routledge, 2003): 2.

established conventions. In no place is this more apparent than the previously mentioned animated series *Jack Donaghy: Executive Superhero* and *Breaking Bad's Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.*

Jack Donaghy creates a speculative universe where *30 Rock's* Donaghy (Alec Baldwin) actually has superpowers. Consistent with *30 Rock* insofar as the character's stakes are relatively low and his goals are petty—in one webisode, Donaghy uses time travel to steal a frozen yogurt, for instance—*Jack Donaghy: Executive Superhero* deploys a strategy of difference, introducing a magical element, superpowers, that the television universe of *30 Rock* could never accommodate. The shift in visual style from live-action to animation functions as an invitation toward suspension of disbelief, cueing viewers into the fact that they're entering a speculative storytelling universe.

Breaking Bad's animated webisode *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.*, which reimagines the show's cast of criminals and drug dealers as crime-fighting superheroes, also takes a goofier tone than the TV show. The conceit of *Breaking Bad's Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.* is that it's an animated comic book created by high-school dropout and meth dealer Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul). The animation's low production value and the fact that it only has one voice actor (Paul himself), adds to the fiction that it's Pinkman's amateur creation. It's a farfetched fiction, admittedly, although we see Pinkman sketch comic book characters in *Breaking Bad*, it's unlikely that he'd be self-motivated enough to create an animated series, especially considering his various commitments selling meth. But in another sense, the very farfetched nature of the webisode's conceit adds to its sense of fun—in a way, *Breaking Bad's* creators are asking their audience to become complicit in

the ridiculous fiction and in doing so, providing relief from, and perhaps poking fun at, the serious tone of the TV episodes.⁶⁵

In *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.*, Pinkman recasts *Breaking Bad*'s drug dealers and small-time criminals as a heroic band of crime-fighting superheroes. Jason Mittell has argued that *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.* is one of the most complex examples of the webisode genre, providing a view into Pinkman's character—particularly the way he rationalizes and justifies his crimes against society.⁶⁶ In *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.*, the shift in genre from *Breaking Bad*'s realistic tone to Pinkman's fantasy illuminates his immaturity and lack of understanding, while also revealing his almost tragic aspirations to be a "good guy." In this way, *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.* can be read as a comment on Pinkman's character—even though it's also enjoyable on the level of a one-off joke, or a winking parody of the TV series that pokes fun at its status as "serious" television. *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.* can't be understood as tragic or poignant without the greater context of *Breaking Bad*, but with that knowledge, the webisode contributes to and builds on an audience's understanding of one of the series' central characters.

Some live-action webisodes are also tonal departures from their television counterparts. A prototypical example would be *True Blood's A Drop of True Blood* webisodes—released between *True Blood's* (HBO, 2008–) second and third seasons.

⁶⁵ It's important to note that *Breaking Bad* isn't all doom and gloom; the series is characterized by a streak of dark humor. For instance, one of the show's most horrifying early moments—when Pinkman tries to dissolve a body in a bathtub using acid, but instead dissolves the bathtub, causing the melting corpse to fall through the ceiling—is also darkly funny. The series also has intermittent surreal comic interludes, such as the mariachi band rendition of the "Ballad of Heisenberg" that kicks "Negro y Azul" (Season 2, Episode 7). While the goofy *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E.* is a departure from the series' usual tone, moments like the "Ballad of Heisenberg" make it a departure with precedent, consistent with the *Breaking Bad*'s brand and overall feel.

⁶⁶ "Transmedia Storytelling," in Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, pre-publication edition (MediaCommons Press, 2012).

Each of these webisodes portrays a member of the ensemble cast coping with the events of the series's second season finale. Unlike other promotional commercials for *True Blood's* third season—all of which hinge on unresolved cliffhangers—the webisodes are less about offering teasers than developing characters. Rather than raising questions about what will happen next, each gives insight into a particular character's emotional state—a leisurely, measured storytelling style that a frenetically-paced, plot-driven show like *True Blood* is generally unable to indulge in. The webisodes were written by series creator Alan Ball, and their tone seems more consistent with Ball's earlier work, such as the moody, character-driven *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001–2005) than the typical *True Blood* episode. While each scene in an episode of *True Blood* generally ends with a question or revelation that catapults the plot forward, culminating in an episode-ending cliffhanger, the webisodes deploy a strategy of difference, emphasizing character quirks and emotions without advancing the plot.

A common strategy of difference for webisodes is an emphasis on subjective stories that shift the focus from the core television series and enrich the audience's view into an ensemble cast. These types of webisodes often work as point-of-view pieces, giving the audience previously unseen windows into a series's minor characters. *The Office's The Accountants* (NBC, 2005–) tells a ten-part narrative focusing on minor characters Angela (Angela Kinsey), Oscar (Oscar Nunez), and Kevin (Brian Baumgartner). While these characters generally appear at the periphery of TV storylines, online they are given the central role. *The Walking Dead* took the focus shift

even further, focusing on the backstory of “the Bicycle Girl,” a peripheral character who briefly appears in the pilot episode of the television series.⁶⁷ Henry Jenkins finds the Bicycle Girl example particularly instructive, because although she’s a minor figure, she is still “iconic,” and memorable. Jenkins writes,

Often, transmedia extensions, for budget and contract reasons, end up working with secondary characters rather than the series leads. This is fine if the secondary characters are ones we care about, if they are ones who have a compelling role to play in the series. In fact, introducing alternative points of view on the action may be one of the most valuable contributions transmedia extensions can make.... Too often, producers work with who-ever is available and the results seem arbitrary and disappointing.⁶⁸

Jenkins argues that Bicycle Girl is almost ideal figure for a web series treatment. As the first zombie that the series protagonist Rick encounters, she’s a minor character who made a major impact with her minimal amount of time onscreen.⁶⁹

In the 10-part webisode series *The Face of the Enemy, Battlestar Galactica* followed the same model, creating a character-focused mini-drama, around a supporting figure. Premiering at the end of the six-month break at the center of *Battlestar Galactica*’s bifurcated Season 4, *The Face of the Enemy* focuses on Lt. Felix Gaeta of the Galactica.⁷⁰ “I was so pleased we were able to build these webisodes around Gaeta,” recalled Jane Espenson, who co-wrote the web series with Seamus Kevin Fahey. “He was one of my absolute favorites on the show, and I always felt he was

⁶⁷ “The Walking Dead Webisodes Now Online,” AMC TV, October 3, 2011, <http://blogs.amctv.com/the-walking-dead/2011/10/the-walking-dead-webisodes-video.php>.

⁶⁸ Jenkins, “Making My Peace with The Bicycle Girl: Reflections on the Walking Dead Web Series.”

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *Battlestar Galactica*’s fourth season was split due to the WGA strike, which was in small part inspired by the *Battlestar* websiodes *The Resistance* (2006), commissioned by NBC. As the network classed webisodes as “promotional additions to existing episode orders rather than separate creative productions,” the web work went unpaid on top of the usual fee received for television episodes, provoking a WGA work stoppage on webisodes that was one of the first public signs of the frustrations that eventually fueled the strike. See James Hibberd, “NBC Finds Webisode Workaround,” *TelevisionWeek* 26. 13 (March 26, 2007): 1, 22.

underutilized.”⁷¹ In the second half of Season 4—yet to premiere at the time of the webisodes’ launch in December 2008—Gaeta leads a mutiny against the crew of *Galactica* in response to their alliance with a rebel faction of Cylons, a race of humanoid robots whom he believes cannot be trusted. The webisodes foreshadow this shift, exploring Gaeta’s motivations for launching the mutiny. According to Espenson,

[*Battlestar Galactica* creator and Executive Producer] Ron Moore was adamant that these webisodes should serve an overall purpose in the story of season four. Gaeta is going to make some decisions in season 4 that are perfect well motivated in the overall run of the show. But these webisodes make it clearer why he makes the decisions that he makes, and at what time he decides that he is going to do those things. It is what I call answering a question you didn't know you were asking. No one, I think, watching the run of season four would think that Gaeta is unmotivated, but anyone who sees the webisodes understands even better why he does what he does.⁷²

Given the fact that presumably not all fans would watch webisodes, it isn’t common that web episodes feed so directly into a show’s continuing plotlines. More often, they cover events that have already past (such as the death of “Bicycle Girl”), speculative narratives (*Jack Donaghy: Executive Superhero*) or small stories unrelated to future arcs (*The Accountants*).

Perhaps in an attempt to entice die-hard fans to the web, the *Battlestar* webisodes also tied up a dangling plot thread. During the show’s third season, Gaeta had stabbed his former boss, Baltar, in the throat with a pen after Baltar whispered something in his ear that was never revealed to the audience. The “Face of the Enemy” webisodes returned to that scene in a flashback and, using footage shot for the earlier

⁷¹ Jane Espenson, “Webisode #1 (Enhanced)”, Syfy.com, <http://www.syfy.com/videos/Battlestar%20Galactica/Webisodes>. At the time, Fahey was a junior staff writer, recently promoted from writing assistant.

⁷² Ibid.

episode, revealed the content of Baltar's whisper.⁷³ Espenson called that moment, "the one genuine loose end that these webisodes wrap up." According to Espenson, it was a directive from Moore that the webisodes close that loop. "It's rare that webisodes are given a role as crucial as establishing what that missing line was," she said.⁷⁴ In a way, it was a perfect role for the webisode. The revelation about the Number Eight was relevant in so far as it set up Gaeta's intention to mutiny. It was interesting—but not essential—for understanding his actions in the second half of Season 4. A perfect tidbit to entice devoted *Battlestar* fans, the revelation wasn't essential for those who missed it. The inclusion of the plot thread also relieved the burden of tying up the loose end from future *Battlestar Galactica* episodes.

Unique in that they fed in to continuing plot lines, *The Face of the Enemy* webisodes also worked particularly well as a storytelling unit, leading a *New York Times* reviewer to proclaim that they "could serve as a model for the webisode genre."⁷⁵ The web series plot plays as an homage to claustrophobic thrillers—Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944) foremost among them. As *The Face of the Enemy* begins, Gaeta is given a brief leave of absence from the *Galactica*. He boards a Raptor, a small shuttle-like spaceship, with four crewmembers and two Number Eight Cylons. After a mechanical malfunction isolates the Raptor from the fleet, the people on board begin to die under mysterious circumstances. The webisodes play out like a classic murder

⁷³ Jane Espenson, "Webisode #8 (Enhanced)", Syfy.com, <http://www.syfy.com/videos/Battlestar%20Galactica/Webisodes>. Baltar said "I know what your Eight did," meaning that he knew Gaeta was having an affair with a Cylon and feeding her information that was causing death of innocent civilians.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Mike Hale, "NBC Bridges Series Gap with Online Miniseries," *New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/29/arts/television/29webi.html?_r=0.

mystery as people die around Gaeta. He eventually discovers that one of the Cylons is responsible for the deaths—as well as for horrors in their shared past on New Caprica—hardening his belief that Cylons as a race cannot be trusted.

Espenson and Fahey isolate the story on a Raptor, a tiny spaceship. This not only satisfies budgetary constraints, it gives the web episodes a familiar form, the Agatha Christie-type murder mystery set in an isolated location with a limited (and, often, dwindling) number of suspects. A literal ticking clock—marking the time until the ship's oxygen runs out—ups the tension. The familiar form makes the webisodes at once easy to understand and enjoy. Further, the clear references to the mystery genre telegraphs that the webisodes are intended as a self-contained story, even though they may reference the larger *Battlestar* narrative through flashbacks and hints toward the future.

Each episode is brief—between three and six minutes—but Espenson and Fahey are able to draw on viewers' previous knowledge of the *Battlestar Galactica* universe to tell a more intricate, complex story than the space would seem to allow. Gaeta's flashbacks to New Caprica require no exposition; neither does the human crewmembers' instant distrust of the two Cylons when events start to go awry. The web series' characterizations also benefit from being part of a larger storytelling universe. When Gaeta succeeds in killing the Cylon responsible for the murder of the crewmembers, he is left alone as the sole survivor on the Raptor. Gaeta—surrounded by corpses and believing that he is about to die—contemplates suicide. As he does, he sings to himself, an activity he'd done before in desperate moment during an earlier

fourth season episode, a moment that would likely be familiar to dedicated viewers of the show. In having Gaeta sing, Espenson said that the webisodes were “borrowing some depth” from earlier episodes of *Battlestar*.⁷⁶ By referencing a prior moment, the singing acted as emotional shorthand, telegraphing the depth of Gaeta’s despair.

Moments like Gaeta’s singing reveal a great strength of derivative webisodes. Serial narratives are accretive, building on moments and, critically, emotions that happened before. Serial storytelling is not just about ever-more complex plots, it allows for the accretion of affect. Espenson can “borrow” emotional depth from the television universe, injecting a short-form show with pathos that it might not be able to generate on its own.

While derivative webisodes may be short form, they often have large, expansive stories as well as character’s emotional palates and histories to draw from and build upon. In doing so, webisode writers can reference prior moments, even playing on and subverting the expectations of their audience. Presuming to speak to viewers familiar with central themes, characters, tone, and plot points, derivative webisodes not only have to do less legwork in terms of establishing a story—they can also draw on the collective memory of the audience to borrow depth from the television world.

A Ten-Part Whole

Conclusion

As we will see in the following chapter, writers of derivative webisodes generally have to negotiate more creative constraints on storytelling than the creators of original web

⁷⁶ Jane Espenson, “Webisode #10 (Enhanced)”, Syfy.com, <http://www.syfy.com/videos/Battlestar%20Galactica/Webisodes>.

series do. While budget is a perpetual limiting factor for both sets of writers, derivative webisode writers also have to work in deference to the core text of the television show. Certain characters and story arcs may be off-limits, particularly if it is territory that might be covered by the television show.

That said, writing stories that are part of a larger narrative universe has its advantages. Unlike the writers of original webisodes, derivative web series writers can riff off a television show's established identity. As we've seen, writers have used derivative web series to explore tonal or generic departures from a TV show's established style, or to explore the motivations of underutilized characters. Derivative web series writers also have the advantage of being able to draw on the audience's knowledge of a television show, a key benefit when writing short form episodes with limited story space.

I believe that the ability to reference viewers' prior knowledge generally makes the stories told by derivative webisodes richer and more narratively satisfying than most original web series. This is particular true of drama; to date, the growth of original dramatic web series has been handicapped by the constraints of short form storytelling. There are many wonderful original web series, but most are comedies, and this is hardly accidental.

However, the key to a successful web series—derivative or original—goes beyond genre. The writers who exploit the form best understand its limitations, and narrow their storytelling scope accordingly. In discussing her writing process for *Face of the Enemy*, Jane Espenson said,

These were not written as a 30-page script that I artificially went through later and put in the act

breaks, these were written as ten little scripts. Each of these act breaks was agonized over from the earliest stages to give you a satisfying act break type feel on every three pages, which is a challenge. You write a very different story depending on the number of act breaks, the number of times you have to turn your story.... Part of the thing that gives these webisodes a different feel than a similar 30-minute chunk of regular *Battlestar* is because the storytelling is different when you have so many act breaks.⁷⁷

Espenson talks about *The Face of the Enemy* as if she's creating act breaks in a single story. Although the story may "turn" from web episode to web episode, it's a single unit segmented into short chunks. Together, the web episodes make a ten-part whole. Many other web series—original and derivative alike—treat each web episode as a unique story. This can work well, particularly in web series inspired by sketch comedy—for instance, the episodes of *Jack Donaghy: Executive Superhero* work as isolated, skit-like segments with little overlap—but often web series try to cover too much ground. Series like *MyMusic* and *The Booth at the End* don't *build* so much as *accumulate*. In trying to pack in too much story, the series creators don't give their audiences the time to create a meaningful relationship with the characters.

Both of Espenson's web series—*Face of the Enemy* and *Husbands*—tackle no more than the amount of story that would fit into a single episode of television. Questions and ideas planted in early webisodes re-emerge in subsequent ones, as they might following an act break on television. While the accelerated storytelling pace creates a different feel than a TV episode, particularly in *Face of the Enemy* and the first season of *Husbands*, Espenson's series have a unity and a limited scope that gives her narratives time to breathe, reaching a storytelling depth that makes them satisfying to consume.

⁷⁷ Jane Espenson, "Webisode #3 (Enhanced)", Syfy.com, <http://www.syfy.com/videos/Battlestar%20Galactica/Webisodes>.

Following Espenson's lead and re-conceptualizing the scope of a web series "season" from a full 12 or 22-episode television season into unified stories with a limited number of developments might be a first step toward telling more satisfying online serials. The importance of Espenson's emphasis on affect and character depth also cannot be understated—an audience's interest in *what* happens is generally diminished when we don't care about the *who*.

That said, Espenson writes with an awareness of the limits of the short form. Web series storytelling strategies do not exist in a vacuum—they are shaped by material constraint. The restrictions on web series production—small budgets, limited locations, and, in the case of derivative series, a TV universe that almost always takes precedence over web-native content—have a major impact on the types of stories web series can tell. In many ways, the web series is a genre defined by limitation, and these constraints force creativity. When budgets or other limits prevent writers from replicating the stories they might tell on TV, they have to deploy a strategy of difference. When a short format prevents a leisurely storytelling or exposition, a strategy of familiarity is needed. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the most successful web series play to these limits.

Web series writers use the limits of web series production as a starting point for creativity. Constraints force writers to distinguish the online stories they tell from the type of story that would air on television. In this sense, many web series are in conversation with traditional television genres. While they draw on an audience's

knowledge of television, they can also extend that knowledge into new territories and experiment with genre, character, and narrative form.

Chapter 3: Web Series Production

Writing on Spec

Aspirants and Original Web Series Production

In the wake of their 2007–2008 strike, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) launched a “Writers Guild 2.0” initiative in an effort to lay a claim on content created for the web.

Under the new guidelines, writers who had scripted web shows were invited to apply for to the WGA East membership.¹ Timothy Cooper, writer and producer of the independent original web series *Concierge* (2010), was encouraged to join the guild by a WGA East representative. “I was the first one to apply under the New Media category,” he recalled:

At first I was rejected, because under the question, “How much did you get paid for this?” I wrote down ‘\$0.’ Because I was the first to apply, there was still some confusion, so I received an e-mail saying, “You’ve been accepted,” and then the day after, I received another e-mail saying, “You’ve been rejected because you got paid \$0, and no writer gets paid \$0 under the Guild’s rate.” They’re still trying to figure out the rates for New Media. Luckily my rep fixed things, and then I got accepted. That was really cool; it’s definitely been one of my dreams to be part of the Guild.²

It’s easy to see why Cooper’s application perplexed the WGA East representatives.

Accepting unpaid work under guild rules would, in fact, run counter to the WGA’s goal of providing creative workers with a reasonable wage. There’s the temptation to read this anecdote as a clash of old and new media cultures—established entertainment industries are challenged when faced with the free labor economies of the Internet.

However, since the breakdown of the Hollywood studio system in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the entertainment industry has developed complex systems of non-monetary compensation. These forms of “symbolic payroll,” to borrow a term from John

¹ Jay A. Fernandez, “WGAE inks 11 new digital denizens,” *Hollywood Reporter* 411 (October 1, 2009): 11.

² “Why Writers Should Not Neglect Sundance—and Web Series,” *Mentorless*, <http://www.mentorless.com/2011/02/11/why-writers-should-not-neglect-sundance%E2%80%94and-web-series/>

Caldwell, provide an instructive point of contrast to the web's much-remarked-upon free labor systems.³ Cooper's earnings of "\$0" have precedent in entertainment industry practice as well as new media production. This hints at a key theme we'll return to throughout this chapter: while "new media" holds the promise of new production practices and economies, it also supports a great deal of continuity with established entertainment industry systems.

The roots of the entertainment industry's now entrenched symbolic payroll systems can be found in the breakdown of the Hollywood studio system in the late 1950s, when, according to Paul Monaco, the major studios transformed

themselves into businesses focused on the securing of production funds, the arranging of contracts, the supervising of productions, and on the marketing of the final product, rather than the actual producing of feature films. The transformation towards becoming managerial entities marked the primary shift of the major studios away from being labor intensive—i.e. characterized by large staffs on payrolls—towards becoming capital intensive with fewer and fewer employees overseeing larger and larger investments.⁴

As a result, Hollywood began to transition to a freelance, work-for-hire system where "deals" were cut between studios and "talent"—the creative workers involved in production. "This shift to 'one-film deals' also affected the established relations of power," writes Thomas Schatz, "with top talent (and their agents and attorneys) gaining more authority over production."⁵

³ John T. Caldwell, "Para-Industry: Researching Hollywood's Blackwaters," *Cinema Journal*. 52, No. 3 (Spring 2013): 162

⁴ Paul Monaco, "The Sixties: 1960-1969," in *History of the American Cinema*, ed. Charles Harpole (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001): 12. For more on the reasons contributing to the breakdown of the Hollywood studio system, see Monaco, 11—15 and Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1992): 8-15.

⁵ Schatz, 11. The growing importance of the personal brand of above-the-line creative individuals in Hollywood can also be seen in the shift from full opening credits listing crew during the studio era, to today's standard of top-tier talent being credited before the movie begins and then again, with a full listing of crew in closing credits.

The new package deal system—enabled and assisted by agents, who played an increasingly important role in putting the packages together—created opportunities for in-demand writers.⁶ “No longer simply working on contract for studios, writers could negotiate greater leverage over decisions about how their work was brought to screen and by whom,” writes Monaco.⁷ This, however, applied only to writers lucky enough to be in a position to negotiate. The dissolution of studio contracts, which ensured some stability for those fortunate enough to gain them, gave way to a freelance work culture where various forms of non-financial capital like personal brand, social ties, and industry clout became increasingly important.

The dominance of freelance employment and the growing importance of the “deal” created an industrial culture that offered forms of symbolic payroll in addition to or in lieu of more traditional forms of compensation, such as salaries and benefits. In Hollywood today, according to John Caldwell, many entertainment industry workers derive “aesthetic salaries,” or “non-financial artistic, social, and cultural capital.”⁸ Each day, Caldwell writes, non-financial capital is exchanged to

get production work; hire top professionals; close deals; justify overtime; demand “extras” from a technician’s skillset (if he or she wants to stay employed); persuade younger “workers” to work for free as interns/assistants; and to persuade outsiders to provide onscreen content for “free.” Getting underpaid, outsourced VFX workers in Mumbai to work without onscreen credits means “paying” them in some substitute form of artistic capital that doesn’t cost the firm any real money. Studios never acknowledge or calculate these symbolic forms of payment and cultural capital in official production budgets. Yet all high-quality content that studios produce is—by definition—built on the foundation provided by the unacknowledged artistic capital that workers themselves “pay” and laterally “exchange” to survive.⁹

⁶ For more on the growing importance of agents and the deals they packaged, see Schatz, 20.

⁷ Monaco, 20.

⁸ Caldwell, “Para-Industry: Researching Hollywood’s Blackwaters,” 162.

⁹ Ibid.

These symbolic payroll systems are possible, Caldwell argues, because “an industry defined by ‘aspiration’ (rather than by stable employment) creates a cultural economy in which everyone constantly stylizes his/her public persona with the trappings of artistry or ‘legitimacy.’” The further workers are from the privileged projects at the center of the film and television industry, the more they must assert “credible stylistic affinities to legitimate onscreen culture.”¹⁰ Access to these “affinities” often takes the place of more traditional forms of compensation.

Not even guild writers—arguably some of the more privileged members in the entertainment hierarchy—are immune from these symbolic payroll systems. For instance, much writing work is uncredited. As credits are tied to compensation under guild rules, acknowledgment on films and TV episodes are the result of complex negotiations that often have more to do with who has the most influential agent, or who is owed a favor, than who actually did the most work.¹¹ Other writing work is uncompensated. According to *Variety*, many screenwriters are forced into doing free rewrites for studios—a practice technically against guild rules—or risk being blackballed from jobs.¹² As development deals have dried up following the 2008 financial crisis, a writer who wants to pursue her own project almost always has to do so on her own time and dime. There’s even a term for writing exploratory scripts for free—writing on “spec,”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Given the culture of rewrites, credit disputes are so common, they are routinely arbitrated by the Writers Guild. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, between 1993 and 1997, 415 films, more than 1/3 of the movies released in that time period, has their writing credits arbitrated by the WGA. For more, see Robert W. Welkos, “Giving Credit Where It’s Due,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 1998, <http://articles.latimes.com/1998/may/11/news/mn-48618>. The process is so fraught that the WGA provides a “Credits Survival Guide,” available at http://www.wga.org/subpage_writersresources.aspx?id=153.

¹² “Writers Cramp,” *Variety* 409, 12 (February 11-February 17, 2008): 1.

creating a “spec” (speculative) script, a screenplay or pilot that no one has commissioned, with the expectation that it may eventually sell, or at least function as a calling card to a real job.

Most original web series are, in a certain sense, created on spec. Few creators have concrete or realistic hopes of selling Internet shows to TV networks or other distributors; the series are aspirational, meant to be used as stepping-stones toward work in entertainment industry, usually in television. Independent creators spend enormous amounts of time self-financing, raising money, and promoting their shows. “Web video is a beast unto itself,” wrote actress Felicia Day, an independent producer and one of the most vocal advocates of the genre. “Unlike TV you don’t get a hiatus. Web show exists 24/7 on the web and, as such, requires that much time to maintain.”¹³

The work of independent creators extends far beyond the aesthetic: in these projects, the entire studio production chain—production, distribution, marketing—has been collapsed into a single person or small team. Often, there are no middlemen. Creators post their work directly to YouTube, and they speak with their audiences through platforms like Twitter and Facebook. While this has opened new channels of communication, it demands monumental time and effort on the part of the creators, and such work is almost always unsalaried. Independent web series creators are responsible for the entire production process, from pre to post, and they’re essentially working for free. Driven by the aspiration of using web projects to jumpstart a career in entertainment, they often derive few benefits beyond Caldwell’s aesthetic salaries.

¹³ <http://feliciaday.com/blog/web-series-4-things-to-ask-yourself-before-starting>

There have, however, been some notable successes. Issa Rae, creator of *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, used social media to attract a sizeable audience throughout the first few self-funded episodes of her first season. Her success was far from spontaneous—*Awkward Black Girl*, Rae said, was her third web series, and she built on the lessons learned (creating short snappy segments, engaging fans through social media) to make the series stick.¹⁴ Rae launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund the rest of the season. Rapper Pharrell Williams was so impressed that he swooped in to help her fund the series' second season. Halfway through the second season run, Rae signed a development deal with writer/producer Shonda Rhimes (*Grey's Anatomy*, *Scandal*), and in late 2012, Rae and Rhimes sold a comedy pilot project to ABC.¹⁵

Thom Woodley attracted network interest with his 2006 series *The Burg*, leveraging the attention into a deal with Michael Eisner's web production company Vuguru. After their joint project, *The All for Nots*, fizzled, Woodley returned to independent producing, working on web series *All's Faire* and *Greg and Donny*, teaming with a cohort of friends and frequent collaborators. Woodley—a WGA signee under the Writers Guild 2.0—currently holds down a self-described “day job” in advertising, while also planning a new series.¹⁶ Many other independent creators work in below-the-line jobs in film and television production, using web series as a way to create their own material. “I am an editor for reality television shows at MTV,” said Thomas Rennie on a

¹⁴ Issa Rae at “Crafting a Web Series That Won’t Embarrass Your Mother,” Sundance Film Festival, January 21, 2013. Further information available at http://filmguide.sundance.org/film/13258/crafting_a_web_series_that_wont_embarrass_your_mother.

¹⁵ “Shonda Rhimes, Issa Rae Join Forces for a New Comedy Series,” *Huffington Post*, October 2, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/02/shonda-rhimes-issa-rae-abc-comedy-series_n_1932515.html

¹⁶ Thom Woodley, interview by author, February 7, 2013. Despite calling it a “day job,” Woodley’s advertising career is far from marginal; he’s the lead copywriter behind many major campaigns including Dos Equis’s popular “The Most Interesting Man in the World.”

thread on WebSeriesNetwork.com asking independent creators to list their day jobs.

“The only way I stay sane is making my content on the evenings and weekends.”¹⁷

Like Woodley and Rennier, most independent producers hold down day jobs, devoting nights and weekends to web series projects. Their path to recognition in the entertainment industry is certainly possible, but far from assured. While a web series can be an effective calling card, on whom exactly should these independent creators call?

Minor Leaguers

Derivative Web Series Production

There are many similarities between the independent web series producers who aspire to break into the entertainment industry and the low-level staffers who create most of today's derivative web programming. Many derivative web series are written by assistants or junior writers, who hope to use the web to gain the experience and exposure necessary to be staffed as TV series writers. In the best-case scenario, webisodes serve as try-outs for writing gigs on series television.

The idea for the *Battlestar Galactica* web series *The Face of the Enemy* originated with Seamus Kevin Fahey, a junior staff writer recently promoted from writers' assistant. Executive producer Jane Espenson partnered with Fahey to oversee and shape his work on the web project. In her commentary on *The Face of the Enemy*, Espenson acknowledges that many of the final decisions on the web series and its plot even went over her head, through *Battlestar Galactica*'s notoriously-particular

¹⁷ “Web Series Creators: What is Your Day Job?” *Web Series Network*, http://webseriesnetwork.com/forum/topics/web-series-creators-whats-your?xg_source=activity&id=2884614%3ATopic%3A79793&page=2#comments

showrunner Ron Moore, underlining Derek Johnson's argument that many narrative extensions are constrained by existing production and industrial hierarchies and "managed with an eye toward ideals of supervision, control, and continuity."¹⁸ The involvement of a writer/producer as senior as Espenson in a web series was more remarkable than typical—in a review of *The Face of the Enemy*, the *New York Times* found her participation worth remarking on. "Quality and creativity, here, are constructed by proximity to privileged production identities at the center of the franchise," says Johnson.¹⁹ This attitude seems to permeate web work—HBO hyped *True Blood's* *A Drop of True Blood* webisodes as "written by [showrunner] Alan Ball." However, in an interview, Ball revealed that the idea for the webisodes came from HBO, and he only ended up writing them after reading a first draft from the network marketing department and realizing he "knew the show and knew what to do."²⁰

Ball's comments hint at one of the emergent tensions in the new media marketplace—the overlaps between marketing departments and traditional creative teams. According to John Caldwell,

Large and growing ranks of illegitimate 'creatives' from the marketing side—employed deep within the signatory studios that have contracts with the 'real' creative unions—will likely be kept on as cheaper, alternative, creative development teams (which prevents them from certain job and seniority protections and from earning standard payments for what is essentially episodic work). The same work-but-less-pay status places these up-and-comers in the same sorry, unrecognized status as the many industry stealth "writers/producers" who have toiled in game shows, reality television, and animation for decades—without the same high fees that WGA writers would earn for the same work.²¹

¹⁸ Derek Johnson, *Media Franchise and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (New York, : New York University Press, 2013), 218; Jane Espenson, "Webisode #1 (Enhanced)", Syfy.com, <http://www.syfy.com/videos/Battlestar%20Galactica/Webisodes>.

¹⁹ Johnson, 216.

²⁰ "Interview with Alan Ball," Archive of American Television, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/alan-ball>.

²¹ John T. Caldwell, "Breaking Ranks: Backdoor Workforces, Messy Workflows, and Craft Disaggregation," *Popular Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2010): 222.

Straddling the line between promotion and narrative content, web extensions are often handed over to network marketing departments, who in turn can pass the work off to independent production shops or design agencies. This is particularly useful for comic book extensions or animated projects that don't require the series extant infrastructure—namely sets and crew—to complete production. For instance, *Breaking Bad's* animated webisode *Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E* was created by interactive design firm Wildlife as work-for-hire for AMC. The work-for-hire model can be a cheap and timely solution for creating promotional content, relieving a burden on overextended creative teams.²² However, as Caldwell has noted, delegating online promotions to marketing departments or design agencies also keeps work creative outside the traditional creative guilds. “In effect, ‘outsourcing’ is now being cultivated even inside these unionized studio workplaces,” he writes.²³

Both Caldwell and Denise Mann have noted that the WGA—which hopes to cement ownership of the web space for guild members—is increasingly staking professional claims on online narrative extensions.²⁴ Even so, staff writers often don't have the time or interest to undertake web projects, and networks—looking for cheap, fresh content to fill the limitless void of online space—also don't want to meet the price tag demanded by high-level creatives. Therefore, most of today's derivative webisodes

²² Denise Mann, “It's Not TV, It's Brand Management,” in *Production Studies*, Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 109-111; “Breaking Bad Gets Animated With a Team S.C.I.E.N.C.E. minisode,” *AMC.TV Blogs*, <http://blogs.amctv.com/breaking-bad/2010/03/team-science-minisode.php>. There's precedent for these practices of outsourcing beyond webisodes. TV title sequences, for instance, are created as work-for-hire by independent interactive design firms, who often engage in pitching and underbidding wars to get the commission.

²³ Caldwell, “Breaking Ranks,” 222.

²⁴ Mann, “It's Not TV, It's Brand Management,” in *Production Studies*, Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 109-111.

are written by low-level workers on the peripheries of writing teams. “Not every show relies on its minor leaguers to run the web,” writes Randee Dawn of the *Hollywood Reporter*, emphasizing existing work hierarchies, but “the trend is to give control over webisodic content to the groundlings who don’t cost as much as the pros – even once they earn their WGA cards—and are happy to get the experience in the process.”²⁵ Even NBC’s *Heroes*, a series which attempted to set itself apart through its online content, delegated the web extensions to assistants. Timm Keppler, assistant to executive producer Dennis Hammer, co-wrote the *Heroes* web series with showrunner Tim Kring’s assistant Jim Martin. “It’s been a great apprenticeship,” Keppler told the *Hollywood Reporter*.²⁶ Since low-level assistant jobs pay so little and demand so much in terms of time, they’re primarily filled by aspirants who hope to use the jobs to advance their own creative careers and projects. Like Keppler, these hopeful writers see a potential for apprenticeship in writing webisodes. “I think a lot of people treat the web as the neglected cousin in the attic eating fish heads,” said Doug Lieblich, an entry-level writer on the CW web series *Gallerina* (retitled *Gallery Girl*, and as of April 2013, yet to be launched). “But it’s an excellent place for young writers.”²⁷ Gennifer Hutchinson, script coordinator for *Breaking Bad*, wrote several *Breaking Bad* “minisodes.” “It’s nice to have something that’s been produced that I can point to, and Bryan Cranston is in it, and you can say, ‘this is my work,’” Hutchinson told the *Hollywood Reporter*.²⁸ She eventually joined the *Breaking Bad* writing staff. Jeanne Leitenberg, an aspiring writer

²⁵ Randee Dawn, “Net Income,” *Hollywood Reporter* 410 (June 11, 2009): 9.

²⁶ Ibid, 8.

²⁷ Rachel Abrams, “Showbiz Reboots the Foot in the Door,” *Variety*, August 20, 2012, 1.

²⁸ Randee Dawn, “Net Income,” 8.

and “special projects administrator” responsible for updating *Gossip Girl*’s online content, achieved a similar trajectory. Leitenberg wrote the *Gossip Girl*’s 2009 webisodes *Chasing Dorota*, leveraging the web project into writing credits on two *Gossip Girl* episodes. “Cheaper online shadow production worlds being pushed by marketing departments may supplant Hollywood’s earlier ‘minor leagues,’ that is, commercial and music video production, which have served as development ‘proving grounds’ for production talent since the 1980s,” suggests Caldwell.²⁹

Staff writers are more likely to become involved in derivative web series when outside sponsors are brought in to work with the parent TV show to develop branded content.³⁰ Several shows have experimented with more explicit brand integration online than writers or producers might allow in the television series itself. For instance, *Warehouse 13*’s (Syfy, 2009–2012) Toyota-sponsored web series *Of Monsters and Men* features *Warehouse 13* characters being pulled into an alternate dimension with only a new Toyota Prius for transport. The series was primarily written by *Warehouse 13* staff writer Benjamin Raab with help from writer’s assistant John-Paul Nickel.³¹ Kim Kyaw, senior media strategist for Toyota, paints an upbeat picture of the *Warehouse 13* collaboration: “The writers went to work and threw out some ideas and kind of workshopped it, and at the end of the day, we’ve got something that tells a nice *Warehouse 13* story, but it also features the Toyota Prius.”³² The series—during which

²⁹ Caldwell, “Breaking Ranks,” 223.

³⁰ This isn’t a universal rule. For instance, *Parks & Recreation*’s web series “April and Andy’s Roadtrip,” was penned by writer’s assistant Greg Levine and production assistant David Phillips.

³¹ Nickel received writing credit on two of the 10 webisodes, and eventually went on to write two episodes of *Warehouse 13*.

³² Jon Lafayette, “Online Episodes Rev Up Toyota’s Warehouse Sponsorship,” *Broadcasting & Cable* 141, no. 26 (June 27, 2011): 31.

the characters spend their time dodging projectiles while shouting things like “Not the Prius!”—hints at some possible future directions for derivative webisode storytelling, however bleak and uninventive they might seem.

While television shows can ghettoize more overtly commercial segments like *Of Monsters and Men* to the web, independent web series creators, many of whom need sponsors to keep production up and running, must undertake a complex process of negotiation to effectively integrate brands into shows and to present those deals and relationships to their savvy and often skeptical fan bases. In this context, how can “authenticity” or “artistic integrity” be maintained by young auteurs?

The Queen Bee

Authenticity and Original Web Series Production

The Internet is not only a potential “backdoor” for aspiring writers to break into the entertainment industry, it also provides a place for established entertainment professionals to reinvent their images, or to exercise more creative control than they could achieve in traditional industry channels. A key case in point is actress Felicia Day, who has been called the “queen bee” of original web series.³³ The leading lady of Joss Whedon’s *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*, as well as a guest star on the seventh season of Whedon’s *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997–2001; UPN, 2001–2003), Day created the popular independent web series *The Guild* in 2007, eventually netting a funding and distribution deal with Microsoft following the show’s first season, thus winning the equivalent of the webisode lottery. A vocal advocate for Internet TV, Day is

³³ Mark Dundas Wood, “Caught in the Web,” *Back Stage* 51, 40 (October 7–October 13, 2010): 11.

on the board of the Streamy Awards, runs a YouTube channel, and has starred or guest-starred in no fewer than 15 web series, many within the past year. In 2010, actor Sandeep Parikh (“The Guild”) told *Back Stage* magazine that the best way to get into web series production was to know Felicia Day.³⁴

Day’s career and public persona provide a useful lens by which to explore key trends and tensions in the production of original web series. Inspired to take charge of her career after professional disappointments, Day embraces and, for many, embodies the democratizing promise of do-it-yourself culture, while also enjoying the advantages of being part of the elite professional and social networks that comprise Hollywood. That irony—and tension—is critical to understanding the stakes and dynamics at the heart of original web series production. While some entertainment industry aspirants see web work as a potential stepping-stone to help them secure employment in the “big leagues” of film and television production, most of those who have found professional success with scripted web series—the Joss Whedons, the Felicia Days—are already part of established entertainment industry networks.

The issue of “authenticity” is critical for independent web creators like Day, who are responsible for cultivating their own audiences. Establishing credibility is particularly important for new media creators fortunate enough to cut deals with major sponsors or established entertainment companies with old media holdings. Independent producers like Day frame their apparent professional success with narratives of financial hardship and creative exclusion, presenting themselves as underdogs in the mainstream entertainment industry. Day engages in a complex process of negotiation, working to

³⁴ Ibid.

maintain “indie” credibility while simultaneously benefiting from the wealth and reach of the entertainment conglomerates that support her projects.³⁵

Claiming a marginal location in the entertainment ecosystem isn’t unique to niche web producers like Day. In a 2010 study of EQAL, the creators of Internet video sensation lonleygirl15 (known to fans as “LG15”), Denise Mann writes that, while “Web workers are eager to differentiate themselves from the dominant Hollywood culture industry as a way of ingratiating themselves with a young, Web-savvy audience; what becomes equally evident is how many continuities exist between the old and so-called new media practices.”³⁶ In EQAL’s case, oppositional rhetoric is critical to establishing an outsider identity. According to Mann,

One of the ways that EQAL has ingratiated itself with the LG15 community of fans is by positioning itself as a group of “independent” Web creators, operating outside the dominant media industries. In spite of deals with Viacom, Google, and other major media conglomerates, the EQAL team has been able to position themselves as underdogs, operating outside of the Hollywood mainstream. This is accomplished in part by maintaining a low overhead and low-budget production aesthetic.³⁷

Mann identifies the key factors also at play in Day’s claims to authenticity—assertions of creative independence, amplification of an underdog status, and the importance of a low-budget production aesthetic. These issues come out most clearly in discussions of professional success, notably the deal Day signed with Microsoft to fund and distribute *The Guild*.

³⁵ The politics of appearance is worth noting here. While she is certainly beautiful, Day’s appearance limits the range of roles in which she might be cast in a mainstream Hollywood production. According to Day: “I don’t have the perfect looks Hollywood loves for the lead part, and then I wasn’t quite character enough for the other parts.” Because of Hollywood’s dominant aesthetic codes, Day would almost certainly have to work in an offbeat or independent project to be a lead. See Sarah Kuhn, “Brand New Day,” *Back Stage* 50, 13 (March 26-April 1, 2009): 6 for an extended interview with Day touching on her career and appearance.

³⁶ Denise Mann, “Next Gen Web Workers: LG15’s Industrial Self-Reflexivity on Steroids,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38, no. 2 (2010): 90.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

A professional actress, Day wrote a pilot for *The Guild* when she felt she was getting typecast as the stereotypical 'quirky girl,' a secretary or librarian type who dresses "crazy" and wears funky glasses.³⁸ "I realized that it might be the only role I play for the rest of my life," she said, "so I decided to write a show to feature me as a character you don't normally see in Hollywood; a plain, introverted girl with a horrible addiction to video games. It's a touch biographical, and I wrote it as a half-hour pilot that didn't garner much interest."³⁹

At the suggestion of friend Kim Evey, who later became Day's co-producer on *The Guild*, Day rewrote her pilot for the web. "We couldn't afford to shoot all 35 pages at once," Day recalled, "so we said, 'Let's split it up into several episodes and put it online.' I rewrote it with that in mind."⁴⁰ She created roles for friends from an improv troop (Sandeep Parikh and Jeff Lewis), and filled other key parts with the help of another long-time friend who also happened to be a casting director.⁴¹ The first two *Guild* episodes were self-funded by Day and Evey. Most of the money, Day recalled, went to food. Cast and crew worked without financial compensation. We were "borrowing cameras and filming in garages," she said. "The budget was a couple hundred dollars; I was essentially getting on Freecycle.org and driving to Irvine to get set dressings off a curb because I thought they would look good in the background."⁴²

Despite the shoestring budget, Day and Evey soon realized that they couldn't afford to sustain a self-financed model. Following a discouraging Hollywood meeting,

³⁸ Sarah Kuhn, "Brand New Day," *Back Stage* 50, 13 (March 26-April 1, 2009): 6.

³⁹ Lesley Goldberg, "How a Girl Geek Made It Big on Her Own," *Hollywood Reporter* 417 (2011): 12–13.

⁴⁰ Sarah Kuhn, "Brand New Day," 6.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Lesley Goldberg, "How a Girl Geek Made It Big on Her Own," 12–13.

the pair put a PayPal button on *The Guild* website.⁴³ Day framed PayPal as a last resort: “I thought that was bizarre, who would pay for my web show? Evidently a lot of people, because from that point on, for the rest of the first season, we were completely funded by fan donations.”⁴⁴ The first season, she later told the *Hollywood Reporter*, “was completely crowd-sourced and crowd-supported. About 550 people from all over the world donated; somebody gave us \$500 once, and I emailed him to find out if he had misplaced the decimal! (He hadn’t.)”⁴⁵ Charming and unassuming, Day minimizes her financial and creative stakes in her interviews, presenting *The Guild*’s success as simple good luck and giving most of the agency to the series’ fan supporters.

While luck may have played a role, Day downplays the amount of labor that went into eliciting sustained fan donations in favor of a narrative that emphasizes the spontaneous groundswell of support. In other interviews, she’s been more candid about the hours of work went into building an active fan base like *The Guild*’s. “It’s very hard to get the word out, especially on the Internet...” Day told *Back Stage* magazine. “For me, everything was thinking like an audience member and not like a network audience. A lot of social networking was involved, a lot of it really targeted ‘Let’s not waste this person’s time’ emails, and just being really smart and selective about it.”⁴⁶ In her study of Day’s Twitter activity, Elizabeth Ellcessor emphasizes the sophistication of her promotional

⁴³ “The Guild Season 1 With Trivia Annotations,” *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSC2TMwyqzg>.

⁴⁴ “Happy Economy Tales: Donations Fuel ‘The Guild,’” Los Angeles: National Public Radio, November 25, 2008.

⁴⁵ Lesley Goldberg, “How a Girl Geek Made It Big on Her Own,” *Hollywood Reporter* 417 (2011): 12–13.

⁴⁶ Day’s candor may be in part due to her audience. A resource for casting and audition notices, *Back Stage* is targeted at theater professionals, particularly actors, who might be interested in undertaking web series projects of their own. See Sarah Kuhn, “Brand New Day,” *Back Stage* 50, 13 (March 26–April 1, 2009): 6.

efforts. “Innocuous social messages of connection doubled as promotional discourse on several levels,” Ellcessor notes, observing that Day’s tweets often demonstrated connections to high-profile entertainment industry personalities like Joss Whedon or Wil Wheaton (*Star Trek: The Next Generation* [First run syndication, 1987—1994]), eliciting their support for Day’s creative projects.⁴⁷ Couched in social language, Day’s promotional efforts appear more “authentic” and invisible than they might otherwise seem.⁴⁸

The success of *The Guild*’s fan funding model attracted Hollywood interest in sponsoring a second season of the series. Day enlisted professional help to cut a deal, signing with George Ruiz, the head of new media at ICM, a premier Hollywood talent agency. According to Ruiz, “at one point, there were 25 different offers on the table, including from some major studios and networks and even a director with several \$100 million films.”⁴⁹ Ruiz eventually negotiated a licensing deal with Microsoft that allowed Day to retain intellectual property rights over *The Guild*. Day emphasized creative independence as the deciding factor in deciding to sign with Microsoft.

We got dozens of offers from networks and producers and co-producers, and independent financing. And I didn’t want to give up rights to my show, and I wanted to make sure that the person we partnered with would stay loyal to the fans because we’re so grassroots, so all summer we waited. And at the end of the day, Xbox LIVE came in and said, hey, let’s partner up and do their show. And I thought it was a great fit. So, it was exciting. I didn’t know it was going to be real, but it turned out to be wonderful.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Ellcessor, “Tweeting @feliciaday: Online Social Media, Convergence, and Subcultural Stardom,” *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (2012): 46–66.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “Actress Felicia Day Reroutes Her Career With Web Series *The Guild*,” *Fast Company*, <http://www.fastcompany.com/1677370/actress-felicia-day-reroutes-her-career-web-series-guild>.

⁵⁰ “Happy Economy Tales: Donations Fuel ‘The Guild’,” Los Angeles: National Public Radio, November 25, 2008.

In this narrative, the deal with Microsoft becomes a way for Day to stay loyal to the *Guild's* independent roots and fan base. She emphasizes Microsoft's late entry as a way of presenting them as a last-minute savior. Microsoft's lateness and Day's refusal to compromise is a consistent thread through all of her recountings of the deal—implicitly validating the agreement as not compromising the authenticity of the show. Day routinely says that she was willing to walk away from a potential partnership, rather than compromise creatively. “We interviewed a lot of studios and producers, and they all wanted the rights to *The Guild* but weren't willing to pay a lot of money for them. We opted to shoot season two using the money we'd saved from [self-published DVD sales].”⁵¹ Plans obviously changed when Day signed with Microsoft.

In interviews, Day rarely mentions Ruiz's involvement in setting up the Microsoft deal. There's no evidence that she's trying to hide the fact—she may think it's uninteresting, or simply want to avoid too much insider baseball—but the result is a presentation of Microsoft as a last-minute angel donor who appeared on the doorstep of two independent creators to save their grassroots show, rather than going through established channels to an major international talent agency. In this way, the mechanisms of the entertainment industry are made invisible. “We came from a place where we had no resources,” Day told the *Hollywood Reporter*, referring to herself and *Guild* producing partner Evey. “We're still two women who work out of our kitchens.”⁵² While Day may continue to work from her kitchen, she clearly benefited from ICM's

⁵¹ Lesley Goldberg, “How a Girl Geek Made It Big on Her Own,” *Hollywood Reporter* 417 (2011): 12.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

resources and access—advantages that are unavailable to the majority of independent web series creators hoping for corporate sponsorship.

There's another danger in the Microsoft-as-angel-donor narrative. According to Ellcessor, Day's endorsement of Microsoft

creates a "halo effect" through which the sponsors' marketing may be even more effective on the targeted audiences. In early radio and television, the sincerity of the star was crucial to the tight association of sponsor, program, and star text, requiring a consistent star text and natural demeanor. For new media stars crafting a star text of connection, authenticity and consistency seem to once again be equally important to a functional relationship between funding and content.⁵³

Day understands the partnership's potential strain on her cultivated persona as an authentic "geek girl" and independent, uncompromising creator. "There's a common perception about Microsoft," she said. "Especially when we first signed with them, the fans had reservations."⁵⁴ Day attempts to balance the potential disruption to her image by emphasizing her continued marginal status as well as the reality of her creative autonomy—"Microsoft doesn't even give me [script] notes!" she says.⁵⁵ Furthermore, "the budget is nowhere near that of a TV show," she says in reference to the money Microsoft allots to *The Guild*. "It's a standard web-series budget—but we're able to pay everyone up front. It's still just a fraction of what people would spend on a 30-second ad."⁵⁶ Despite corporate support, *The Guild*, she seems to suggest, hasn't strayed far from its low budget, bootstrapping-DiY roots.

Day's emphasis on budget suggests the extent to which production values, and, ultimately, aesthetic codes, are bound up in the struggles over authenticity in original

⁵³ Ellcessor, "Tweeting @feliciaday: Online Social Media, Convergence, and Subcultural Stardom," 46-66.

⁵⁴ Actress Felicia Day Reroutes Her Career With Web Series *The Guild*, "Fast Company," <http://www.fastcompany.com/1677370/actress-felicia-day-reroutes-her-career-web-series-guild>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Goldberg, 13.

web series. On the one hand, legitimacy within the entertainment industry requires a certain level of money and production infrastructure—particularly for projects like web shows that are generally viewed as second tier work. Jon Heder, star of the Internet series *Woke Up Dead* (2009) (as well as feature films *Napoleon Dynamite* [Jared Hess, 2004] and *Blades of Glory* [Josh Gordon and Will Speck, 2007]), said production on his web series was “like shooting a film... [and I thought] that’s cool because you’re like, ‘ok, this is legit.’ I thought it would be like five guys with a boom mike.”⁵⁷ On the other hand, the emerging aesthetic codes of web video demand a certain roughness from DiY productions. The low-budget aesthetic and homemade nature of the shows in a certain sense become synonymous with authenticity. However, it’s a roughness with built-in limits; in a 2012 interview with *The Economist*, Felicia Day noted that today’s audiences have “very low” tolerance for grainy video, so she uses multiple cameras to give *The Guild* a look that is as close to aesthetic codes of traditional television as possible.⁵⁸ The “authentic” roughness of Day’s DiY web TV is, in a certain sense, managed and produced—walking the line between glossy television and homespun aesthetics.

When independence and “indie cred” are integral parts of a producer’s appeal, narratives surrounding sponsorship become incredibly important. Day presents Microsoft’s involvement as a kind of empowerment, almost an endorsement of independent media. “It’s all about empowering the creator and empowering myself,” she says, in reference to the Microsoft deal.⁵⁹ She also represents her deal as a potential

⁵⁷ Qtd. in Nick Marx, “The Missing Link Moment: Web Comedies in New Media Industries,” *Velvet Light Trap* no. 68 (2011): 19.

⁵⁸ “A tube for all tastes: Online television,” *The Economist Online*, July 24, 2012.

⁵⁹ Sarah Kuhn, “Brand New Day,” *Back Stage* 50, 13 (March 26-April 1, 2009): 6.

model that could empower other independent creators, saying, “If you want to create something, just put it out there. And just stay loyal—you know, stick to your guns. There were a lot of times when I could have sold the show, and I didn’t. And I just kept going and subsidized it with whatever I could.”⁶⁰ The key to her success, and to attracting a sponsor, Day seems to say, is loyalty to her authentic concept.

In terms of her personal brand, Day emphasizes her continued outsider status, despite success with *The Guild*. “I’m used to being an outsider,” she said to *Fast Company*. “I was homeschooled. I don’t think like other people do.”⁶¹ *The Guild* “is not opening a ton of doors for me as far as mainstream acting,” she said to *Back Stage*, “which I find surprising, but that’s just the way it is. I just always have to remember there’s a reason why I started to work outside the system, and it’s not going to change overnight.”⁶² Day stresses her continued refusal to compromise, and the creative freedom that this refusal brings with it: “I’m turning down a lot of money. I could be much richer now. But if I have an idea, I can have it out to the world very quickly.”⁶³ Comments like these broadcast iconoclasm and “authenticity” despite Day’s involvement with established industrial players.

An insider who cultivates outsider status, Day is a fitting face for a liminal genre like the web series. Web series seem to hold the promise of different or more democratic production practices—by virtue of being new, or perhaps because so many

⁶⁰ “Happy Economy Tales: Donations Fuel ‘The Guild,’” Los Angeles: National Public Radio, November 25, 2008.

⁶¹ Actress Felicia Day Reroutes Her Career With Web Series *The Guild*,” *Fast Company*, <http://www.fastcompany.com/1677370/actress-felicia-day-reroutes-her-career-web-series-guild>.

⁶² Sarah Kuhn, “Brand New Day,” *Back Stage* 50, 13 (March 26–April 1, 2009): 6.

⁶³ Actress Felicia Day Reroutes Her Career With Web Series *The Guild*,” *Fast Company*, <http://www.fastcompany.com/1677370/actress-felicia-day-reroutes-her-career-web-series-guild>.

series are fueled by participatory practices like crowdfunding. While many web series—Day's included—have exposed new talent and stories to audiences, their production has many more similarities to established entertainment practices than has been previously acknowledged. Often, creative freedom is producers' primary compensation. For financially secure industry insiders, an "aesthetic salary" is sometimes the best enticement to start to work on the web.

A Different Kind of Development

The Aesthetic Rewards of Original Web Series

Like Day, many established entertainment professionals turn to web series to jumpstart or diversify their careers in traditional media, or to explore creative outlets that might not be open to them in film and television. For instance, while Day created *The Guild* to avoid being typecast, actor Brent Spiner (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*, 1987—1994), creator and star of the web series *Fresh Hell* (2011—), says his web series helps him get cast—period. He explains his interest in online programming bluntly: "Why not? I want a show and the networks aren't exactly breaking my door down to get me."⁶⁴ Spiner hopes to eventually bring *Fresh Hell* to television. "I would be fine if it were [on] the Fabric Network," he said. "I would like to do it on television so we could do longer episodes. We can't afford to do that on our own, we don't have a sponsor. Obviously my dream of dreams is either have it on TV, or get a sponsor and we can do it in this format [online]."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ James Careless, "Celebs on the Web," *Streaming Media* (Dec 2011/Jan 2012): 28–30, 32, 34–35.

⁶⁵ "Exclusive Interview: Brent Spiner Talks Fresh Hell," *TrekMovie.com*, <http://trekmovie.com/2012/03/22/exclusive-interview-brent-spiner-talks-fresh-hell-and-star-trek-tng-25/>.

Mary Lynn Rajs kub, best known for her role as tech expert Chloe O'Brien on *24* (FOX, 2001—2010), created and stars in the web series *Dicki*, which found a home online after it was passed on as a TV project. Coming to *Dicki* straight off a cancelled network sitcom, Rajs kub emphasizes the creative rewards of web work, especially in contrast to television: "The web lets you try a bunch of different stuff and gauge the results...it's a great place to develop a character and see what the response is versus going to a bigger network where you get thrown into a different kind of development.... The web won't cancel you after three episodes."⁶⁶ Writer Jane Espenson also enjoyed the creative freedom that came with her independent web project *Husbands*. "There was no pressure from above," Espenson says. "I, in particular, wasn't ever thinking about, 'Do I have to second-guess someone? What does the show runner want, what does the studio want, what does the network want?' I could just say, 'Here's what I want, and let's make it the heck happen.'"⁶⁷ In Espenson's case, *Husbands* also represents a departure from the type of work she is best known for. A writer on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Battlestar Galactica* (SciFi, 2004-2009), *Firefly* (FOX, 2002), *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011—), and *Once Upon a Time* (ABC, 2011—), Espenson has built a career primarily in hour-long dramas with a science fiction or fantasy twist. *Husbands*—essentially a half-hour sitcom—diversifies her portfolio and could function as a calling card for television comedy work.

⁶⁶"From Chloe to Dicki," *The Insider: E! Online*, http://theinsider.etonline.com/ol/45182_Mary_Lynn_Rajs_kub_Talks_24_Movie_Dicki_Webseries/index.html

⁶⁷"Interview with Jane Espenson," *Streaming Garage*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ShDSeA1qJE>.

Mike Rotman, CEO of online content hub Streaming Garage, puts his finger on the artistic benefit and financial tradeoffs of web work for entertainment professionals. “Working on the web allows celebs to flex their acting muscles, due to the freedom of the medium,” he says. “That said, there really isn’t any money in it.”⁶⁸ In this environment, aesthetic compensation, to again cite Caldwell’s concept, is vitally important. While they all may have aspirations to move their specific web projects to TV—attracting bigger audiences and paychecks—the primary benefits described by Espenson, Rajskub, and to some degree Spinner, seem to be creative and aesthetic. Web series give their producers—aspirants and professionals alike—a creative freedom that is often unattainable in more mainstream entertainment jobs with greater “pressure from above.” That is as true for established professionals as it is for independent aspirants. According to Rajskub, “Anything you work on that you are passionate about will eventually benefit your career in some way. In other words, there is no direct [financial] benefit [working on *Dicki*]. For me, it serves to develop ideas and characters in a relatively low cost way and see if there is an audience for them.”⁶⁹

Some web startup companies realized that creative freedom was one of the biggest enticements they could offer entertainment professionals. Gary Levine, president of now-failed web comedy startup Icebox.com, told *Variety* that the money he could offer, “is far below what [content creators] would command in television and film. And to some extent it basically dictates that we are the ‘project on the side.’ We’re fine with that. We’ve become the passion project on the side for almost all of our writers. So

⁶⁸ James Careless, “Celebs on the Web,” *Streaming Media Magazine* (Dec 2011/Jan 2012).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

they know this isn't their day job. But they really can't wait to get back to the Icebox series."⁷⁰ Steve Sanford, CEO of Icebox.com, amplifies Levine's point: "One of the founding principles of our company is freedom and a lack of censorship....If our writers want to be censored, they can go write for network television. They all do anyway. TV is a place where they can do really good work, but there are some constraints. Icebox is a place where they can take some more creative risks."⁷¹

While aesthetic compensation might be reward enough for relatively successful entertainment professionals who presumably enjoy a degree of financial stability, it is also the primary benefit of web work for many entertainment industry aspirants, who have much longer shots of leveraging their independent projects into a stepping-stone that benefits their career.

Farm Teams

The Internet as a Television Development Lab

Television networks are experimenting with existing TV development practices online, using the web as a low-cost testing ground for new shows and talent. If a particular project or performer proves itself on the web—whether by attracting an audience or creating a good, saleable product—networks can either repackage the content for domestic or international television distribution (a practice that seems to be falling increasingly out of style, with the exception of sketch comedy programming), or work with the performer to develop a unique TV or film project. According to Sharon Tal, VP of content development at FOX International Channels, "The process is to first incubate

⁷⁰ Marc Graser, "Dot-Com Dough," *Variety*, 2000, 1.

⁷¹ Ann Donahue, "Naughty by Nature," *Variety*, 2000, 42.

the project on a digital level and then, if we create buzz, attract eyeballs and get enough advertisers behind us, we'll move forward into TV development."⁷²

Comedy programming is the exception to this rule. Comedy Central and programs like Cartoon Network's Adult Swim have seen modest success with adapting web content to television. Comedy Central, in particular, used the company-owned comedy site Atom.com to incubate potential content.⁷³ While the Atom.com web series *Secret Girlfriend* (2009) didn't prove a major hit on Comedy Central, the series "did prove the advantage of using the web as a cost-effective part of the development process," according to Lauren Corrado, Comedy Central's programming president. When Comedy was unsure about airing *The Fuzz*—focusing on the exploits of a police force in a seedy world peopled by puppets and humans—Comedy cut the pilot into chunks and posted it on Atom. "We knew *The Fuzz* would make for a great web short," said Corrado. "This was a way we [Comedy and Atom] could both get something out of it." Corrado suggests that the network will focus on using the Internet for talent development. The web, she says "offers us the opportunity to see whether [potential talent] can write, act or direct. It is almost like they can walk in the door already having proven certain things."⁷⁴

In his study of the comedy website FunnyorDie.com, Nick Marx demonstrates that the site's owners have systematically moved their content to other delivery platforms—signing a deal with HBO that created the *Funny or Die Presents* series,

⁷² Leo Barraclough, "Business model still a work in flux," *Variety* 414.7 (March 30-April 5, 2009): A25.

⁷³ As of 2012, Atom.com has been rebranded as Comedy Central Studios, and absorbed more tightly into the network.

⁷⁴ Alex Weprin, "Comedy Central Bets Big on Web Development," *Broadcasting and Cable* 139, no. 45 (December 7, 2009): 4.

touring the country with “Will Ferrell’s Funny or Die Comedy Tour, Presented by Semi-Pro!,” or outsourcing FunnyorDie writers to create “viral” ads for companies like Hyatt and Starbucks.⁷⁵ More recently, in January 2013, Comedy Central announced that it ordered the wildly popular FunnyorDie.com sketch “Drunk History” to series.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, in an interview with *Variety*, FunnyorDie founder Dick Glover emphasizes the primary importance of the web in his operation. “A website doesn’t exist to be an incubator of product,” he says. “It exists to be a place where you can get funny short form videos and be amused. If it becomes a TV pilot or show, so much the better.”⁷⁷

Even so, as long as online advertising revenue remains less than the amount generated on TV, web content creators and online production companies like FunnyorDie will have a major incentive to try to move their stories and concepts to other mediums, either repackaging them for increased revenue or repurposing them for new markets.

Repackaging web content for distribution on other delivery channels remains an option for networks and studios, although few have replicated the success of FunnyorDie. According to Eva Davis, Executive VP for Warner Premiere, web content can be theoretically “sliced and diced any which way,” to be distributed on television, video on demand, and other outlets.⁷⁸ But the failure of several high-profile web-to-TV projects, notably *Quarterlife* (NBC, 2008), has made the rebroadcast of web content on TV less appealing, particularly in the domestic market. The CW’s use of a re-cut *Dr.*

⁷⁵ Nick Marx, “The Missing Link Moment: Web Comedies in New Media Industries,” *Velvet Light Trap* no. 68 (2011).

⁷⁶ “History at its Finest! Comedy Central Greenlights “Drunk History” to Series,” *Entertainment Newsweekly* (Jan. 25, 2013): 443.

⁷⁷ Peter Caranicas, “Waiting for Web Wonder,” *Variety*, 2010, 1.

⁷⁸ Major repackaging failures such as NBC’s *Quarterlife* beg the question of whether it is as easy to repackage content for other mediums as Davis might suggest. Peter Caranicas, “Waiting for Web Wonder,” *Variety*, 2010, 1.

Horrible to fill dead programming space before a 2102 fall series premiere shows the most likely way web shows might air on TV—not as big, splashy premieres, but as low-cost air filler.

In the late 2000s, NBC and HBO had full-service in-house web production companies that were designed to create original online content that might entice web viewers to the network's existing online content libraries, and potentially lead to TV development deals. As of today, each of those production companies has been shut down. Many networks seem to be going the way of ABC—waiting for Internet talent like Issa Rae to rise to their notice. “Networks can’t own every show on the Web,” said Kim Masters of NPR, “but when someone rises from obscurity by posting clever videos on a site like YouTube, CBS or some other network is likely to be there with a check in hand.”⁷⁹ While Masters’s assessment may be overly optimistic, the hope of getting a development deal continues to motivate many independent creators.

Twitter Plus Lunches

Original Web Series and Social Connections

Social connections make original web series possible. While it has become a truism that success in the entertainment industry is about “who you know,” with web series often relying on free labor, the ties of friendship—and all the guilt and goodwill that come with them—enable many of these productions. For productions that can’t afford to pay the people who work on them, the importance of social connections and currency can’t be understated.

⁷⁹ “NBC Takes Web Programming a Step Further,” *NPR*, July 3, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5529217>.

Often, social connections help generate projects. When *Husbands* co-creators Jane Espenson and Brad Bell were asked in an interview how the idea for the series developed, they said:

Bell: "Twitter is where it's at. That's how we met, initially."

Espenson: "Twitter plus lunches."⁸⁰

"That's exactly why I put myself on YouTube to begin with," Bell continued. "I thought, opportunity will come from this. And much, much more than that has come from it."

Espenson recalled that the friendly vibe permeated the whole production. When asked how working on the web was different from traditional television, she said, "What really made [*Husbands*] feel different to me was that we were all friends."⁸¹

These comments shed light on how many of these projects develop in free labor conditions. When major compensations are artistic and social, people are more naturally inclined to draw on their existing social networks' expertise and work with people they like being around.⁸² "Being asked to act in a friend's web series is the new jury duty," joked Brent Spiner, pointing not only to the importance of social networks, but also to the status of web series in the hierarchies of entertainment work.⁸³ Spiner himself convinced friend and former *Star Trek: The Next Generation* colleague Levar Burton to guest star in an episode of his series web *Fresh Hell*. Ileana Douglas has packed her

⁸⁰ "Interview with Jane Espenson," *Streaming Garage*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ShDSeA1qJE>.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green draw on Lewis Hyde in *Spreadable Media* to make a distinction between commercial "value" and "worth"—a cultural exchange that you can't put a price in. They note that many fans are frustrated when corporations assign financial value to the "informal" worth-based "reciprocity that operates within some forms of peer-to-peer culture." Many forms of web series draw on these worth-based forms of compensation. For more see Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2013): 67—72.

⁸³ James Careless, "Celebs on the Web," *Streaming Media Magazine* (Dec 2011/Jan 2012): 28–30, 32, 34–35.

IKEA-funded web show *Built to Assemble* with celebrity cameos from friends like Ed Begley Jr., Jeff Goldblum, and Patricia Heaton.

According to Sandeep Parikh, creator of the web series *The Legend of Neil* (2008–2010), actors can't break into web series through auditions or "the headshot mailing thing." Instead get "involved in a circle of folks that are creating cool things that you like."⁸⁴ Parikh, perhaps best known as Zaboo on *The Guild*, was cast in that show when he became friends with Felicia Day through an improv group. In fact, *The Guild* is often cast out of the producers' social networks; auditions are held "only when nobody within the producers' circle of acquaintances fits the bill." *Legend of Neil* employed the same tactics, only holding auditions for one or two roles per season.⁸⁵

Different sorts of social connections are also emerging between producers and fans as content creators speak directly to their audiences through social networking platforms like Twitter. "People will email what they think of [*Fresh Hell*] from all over the world," said Spiner. "You don't have to wait for reviews or for the package to be sold to another country. It's there immediately. I get feedback from Russia, France, China, Germany, everywhere."⁸⁶ Mary Lynn Rajs kub of the web series *Dicki* also emphasized the instantaneous feedback enabled by the web, likening it to live performance. "It's just like doing stand up," she said. "You're doing bits, getting a response from the audience

⁸⁴ Mark Dundas Wood, "Caught in the Web," *Back Stage* 51, 40 (October 7–October 13, 2010): 11, 39.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Terra Gaines, "Fresh Hell for Star Trek's Data," *Houston Culture Map*, <http://houston.culturemap.com/newsdetail/09-06-12-13-12-ifresh-hell-ifor-istar-trekis-data-brent-spiner-owes-heavenly-career-to-legacy-of-cecil-pickett/>

and tweaking based on that. You have time to figure it out.”⁸⁷ Issa Rae credits the success of *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* to savvy social media use. Audience outreach “has to be authentic,” said Rae. “For my series specifically, there was a community that was formed. A lot of people came out and said ‘Oh my god, I’m awkward too, and I can come out of this awkward closet and let you guys know.’” Rae said she and her team worked to “foster that community, ask them questions, to share their story. It’s really been interactive in a sense—the first season specifically. Since I was filming and writing as I was going, the audience feedback was everything.” That feedback even affected continuing plotlines. Halfway through the first season, Rae introduced “White Jay,” a love interest for her character J. White Jay was supposed to be a one-episode character, but the response on Twitter was enormous. “The audience loved him so much, and were like ‘Who’s that?’ ‘Keep him! Yes, yes, yes,’ so we were like, ‘Okay, we’ll keep him around,’” said Rae. “And that really helped move the story forward. The audience was a huge part, and making them feel important is extremely important.”⁸⁸ Web series fans are beginning to expect the kind of social media attention given by popular creators like Rae. Thom Woodley told me that although he hadn’t used Twitter to promote any of his previous web shows, he felt like he had to for his upcoming series.⁸⁹ Web series geared toward younger viewers—such as the wildly popular *The*

⁸⁷“From Chloe to Dicki,” *The Insider: E! Online*, http://theinsider.etonline.com/lol/45182_Mary_Lynn_Rajskub_Talks_24_Movie_Dicki_Webseries/index.html

⁸⁸ Issa Rae at “Crafting a Web Series That Won’t Embarrass Your Mother,” Sundance Film Festival, January 21, 2013. Further information available at http://filmguide.sundance.org/film/13258/crafting_a_web_series_that_wont_embarrass_your_mother.

⁸⁹ Thom Woodley, interview by author, February 7, 2013.

Lizzie Bennet Diaries—have built veritable empires in Twitter, creating accounts for each web series character that boast tens of thousands of followers.⁹⁰

According to Ellcessor, “the shared experiences of online technology blur producer and consumer distinctions, as stars engage in the same practices as fans.”⁹¹ Although managing social networking profiles is greater work for independent creators, it also gives fans greater access—and perhaps, greater feelings of ownership—over the show or a particular producer. Henry Jenkins has posited that social media allows a creator like Joss Whedon to build “a more intimate relationship with his audience. Fans of *Dr. Horrible* felt they had a participatory stake in this series they had helped promote.”⁹² While Ellcessor cautions that producers’ approachable social media personas can camouflage or couch promotional discourse, smoothing “the relationship between financial interests and cult audiences,” social media remains a key platform where interest in shows is built and sustained.⁹³ The web is putting the kind of work that had previously been the purview of marketing departments into the hands of many independent creators—simultaneously expanding their job description and encouraging them to forge new and increasingly direct relationships with their audiences.

Sustainable Production?

Conclusion

While many independent web series producers hope to use their online shows to achieve recognition in the mainstream entertainment industry, they have a difficult path.

⁹⁰ For more information see this list of *Lizzie Bennet Diaries* character Twitter accounts, aggregated by the series’ creators: <https://twitter.com/thelbdoofficial/characters>.

⁹¹ Ellcessor, 62.

⁹² Henry Jenkins, “Joss Whedon, The Browncoats, and Dr. Horrible,” *Spreadable Media: Web Exclusive Essay*, <http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/jenkins1/#.UTQNN3zF3Io>

⁹³ Ellcessor, 62.

Most web series exist because their writers and producers are willing to work for free or at cost, deriving aesthetic, social, or other forms of non-monetary compensation.

Ironically, if the Writer's Guild succeeds in unionizing these independent workers—as suggested by the aspirations of the Writer's Guild 2.0—it might render their self-created productions untenable, as most original web series can't meet union compensation guidelines.

Whether or not web series will develop a sustainable production model remains to be seen. As long as television brings bigger paychecks—made possible by bigger audiences and more advertising dollars—it's unlikely that scripted web series will be seen as much more than a stepping stone to work in another medium. Until fresh business models or reliable advertising measurements make web TV lucrative, the support structures that make careers possible in television, film, and other media won't exist for online writers.

The trade-off for poor compensation packages is creative freedom. The Internet has emerged as a venue for shows like *Husbands* focused on groups that marketers might call “niche”—people who don't often see their stories told on traditional TV. And *Husbands* is just the beginning: Issa Rae was inspired to launch *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* because she didn't see any female nerds of color on television.⁹⁴ Daryn Straus created DigitalChickTV.com, a web channel featuring series about women by female creators, while the long-running web series *Anyone But Me* (2008–2012)

⁹⁴ Issa Rae at “Crafting a Web Series That Won't Embarrass Your Mother,” Sundance Film Festival, January 21, 2013.

focused on the struggles of teenaged lesbian, building a devoted fan base who funded the show's production in the days before Kickstarter.

The Internet has become a venue where new voices and underrepresented talents can make serial stories in a television-inspired format. Increased access to the tools of production and distribution has expanded the breadth of TV stories; it just so happens that these stories are online. It's unlikely that this diversity of voices would be possible in a landscape that was more codified and institutionalized—a landscape that perhaps ensured better compensation.

But what is the cost of creative freedom, in terms of the day-to-day lives of web series creators? How long can people work for free before they have to do something else? Unlike fan fiction writers for instance, who also spend a great deal of time making creative products for free while deriving “worth-based” aesthetic or social compensation as part of a gift economy, the majority of web series creators seem to have aspirations for their work to eventually be recognized in some way within the traditional entertainment industry. Web series have the allure of being a democratic, new-media enabled storytelling form, but an investigation of their production shows that there is also a great deal of continuity with established industry practices. While web series are a way for independent creators to tell stories of their own making, ultimately, those with entertainment industry connections seem to be best equipped to use new media tools to support their passion projects. In other words, the Internet may have helped democratize access to the tools of TV storytelling and distribution, but it also supports the structures and institutions already in place in Hollywood.

Conclusion

For every *Dr. Horrible*, there is a *Quarterlife*. When the series launched in 2007, Ed Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz, veteran writer/producers with television credits like *thirtysomething* (ABC, 1987–1991), *My So Called Life* (ABC, 1994–1995), and *Once and Again* (ABC, 1992–2002) were heralded as trailblazers in television development. Initially developed by ABC as a drama pilot, *Quarterlife* (then titled *1/4life*) migrated online when the network passed. The series—36 eight-minute web episodes that totaled 6 hours of programming—was deficit-financed by Zwick and Herskovitz to a total of about \$500,000. “We’ve broken the cardinal rule of the film business,” said Herskovitz. “Never spend your own money on projects.”¹ When NBC bought *Quarterlife* during the writers strike and announced plans to air the web series as an hour-long drama, it seemed like Zwick and Herskovitz’s experiment had paid off. But the series suffered abysmal ratings, and NBC cancelled it shortly thereafter, sparking headlines in the trades like “The Swift Death of *Quarterlife*” and “Is there an Afterlife?”²

There are many reasons that *Dr. Horrible* succeeded and *Quarterlife* failed. For instance, NBC’s scheduling decisions arguably harmed *Quarterlife*; while Whedon’s effective mobilization of his dedicated, Internet-literate fan base helped *Dr. Horrible*. But while Whedon easily recouped his investment in the self-funded *Dr. Horrible*, *Quarterlife* shows that do-it-yourself TV models can carry a great deal of risk, even for established

¹ Cynthia Littleton, “This Pen’s for Hire,” *Variety*, 2007. For more background on *Quarterlife*, see Heather Hendershot, “My So-Called Independents,” *The Nation*, May 29, 2008, <http://www.thenation.com/article/my-so-called-independents#>

² Nellie Andreeva, “With the swift death of ‘Quarterlife,’ ‘Sanctuary’ is true web-to-TV pioneer,” *Hollywood Reporter* 407 (November 18, 2008): 6; Daisy Whitney, “Is there an Afterlife?” *TelevisionWeek* 27.7 (March 3-10, 2008): 1.

entertainment professionals. When the creators are aspirants—not Joss Whedons or Ed Zwicks—these consequences can be hard to absorb. While Zwick and Herskovitz offset their personal investment in *Quarterlife* with private investment and sponsorship dollars from Toyota and Pepsi, and have since seen subsequent success in feature films, these options are rarely available to independent creators.

For aspirants, Kickstarter and other crowdfunding platforms provide a welcome alternative to self-funding, but the recent success of the Kickstarter-funded *Veronica Mars* (UPN, 2004–2006; The CW, 2006–2007) movie demonstrates that truly independent producers are at a marketing disadvantage, even on crowdfunding platforms that generally brand themselves as an alternative, indie domain.³

Crowdfunding may seem fresh and trendy, but it's not exempt from the rules of the marketplace. Truly independent producers can't match the exposure available to big-name "independents" like Whedon and *Veronica Mars* creator Rob Thomas, who have built their personal brands and dedicated fan bases with the help of studio and network marketing systems. While it is fantastic that *Veronica Mars*'s fans jumpstarted a project that might have never otherwise reached production, the money raised is essentially a seed fund for Warner Bros. It is extremely unlikely that Thomas would have seen such a major response if *Veronica Mars* hadn't previously aired on television and built up a dedicated fan base through years of corporately-managed DVD sales and distribution.

This suggests a critical and often overlooked point: new digital tools and technologies often benefit creators inside the Hollywood system as much, if not more,

³ The *Veronica Mars* movie reached its funding goal of \$2 million dollars half a day after the Kickstarter campaign launched. For more information, see <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/559914737/the-veronica-mars-movie-project>

than they benefit independents. If *Dr. Horrible*, *Veronica Mars*, and *Quarterlife* hadn't been created by "known" writers with recognizable brand identities, *Dr. Horrible* wouldn't have crashed Hulu, *Veronica Mars* wouldn't have broken Kickstarter fundraising records, and *Quarterlife*—for all its failings—wouldn't have been picked up by NBC. It's not impossible for independent creators and aspirants to use the web to launch careers in established entertainment industries, but their path is far from assured.

While the expanded access to digital technologies is undeniable, in the Hollywood context, people already embedded in the system are the ones who are best equipped to use new tools and technologies to get their passion projects off the ground. Distribution platforms like YouTube level the playing field to some degree by placing the work of independent producers alongside programs created by established producers like Whedon and Jane Espenson. While these juxtapositions create an exciting potential for dialogue with artists who might otherwise be inaccessible, it also puts aspirants' work into direct comparison and, perhaps, competition with professionals. Due to the advantages professionals enjoy when it comes to funding and production, in many ways, the odds are stacked against the independents.

One place where this is the case is storytelling, a critical—and in too many analyses—invisible factor. Over the past seventy years, American television storytelling has developed into a professionalized skill, with regular (and, to some degree, arbitrary) conventions and norms. For instance, conversations are driven by conflict, and scenes often end on a point of escalation. Audiences may not be aware to the degree they've internalized these rhythms, and how much such rhythms shape viewers' responses to

work. These storytelling patterns make any given television story recognizable as “TV.” The quality or authenticity of web series is often measured by how closely they hew to the conventions of television, the legacy medium. In the same way that some web series try to establish legitimacy by emulating television production aesthetics— using high key lighting, for instance—many web series also deploy TV’s storytelling rhythms, with varying degrees of success. While independent creators like Issa Rae prove that many people without professional television writing experience can create compelling web series, in general, professional Hollywood writers like Whedon and Espenson—familiar with the norms of TV storytelling—are better equipped to successfully deploy them online. While the expansion of digital technology has allowed for more access to the tools of storytelling, in many ways TV storytelling itself hasn’t been democratized.

So where does that leave web series? Like many fringe storytelling forms, web series enjoy a degree of creative freedom that television series—pitched to a broader audience—can’t achieve. In a sense, web series are the ultimate niche television, aggregating tiny audiences with specific interests. While this makes web series attractive to brands looking to reach particular demographics, it also gives the series a chance to tell stories that wouldn’t necessarily find a place on broadcast television.⁴ It’s hard to imagine *Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* on network, or even cable, TV. While many of these web shows may never see a network meeting, or reach the

⁴ For more on the potential strengths (and pitfalls) of branded web series, see Leslie Kaufman and Tanzina Vega, “Media Giants Chase Online Ads With Original Shows,” *New York Times*, May 5, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/06/business/media/media-giants-chase-online-ads-with-original-shows.html>.

audience their creators hope for, they're a testing ground for a television storytelling that is more inclusive in the types of characters and stories that it features.

In addition to expanding the scope of TV storytelling, web series expand the definition of television itself. Henry Jenkins writes,

[With *Dr. Horrible* and *The Guild*,] Whedon and [Felicia] Day are demonstrating that television may be a genre or format of entertainment -- which looks and feels "like television" even if it is never broadcast. Here, television may refer to a form of storytelling which comes in short chunks which are organized as part of longer series which unfold across seasons. We may not know what television is but we recognize it—in this case, with an Emmy—when we see it.⁵

The emerging culture of indie web series production is inspiring more people to try their hand at telling serial, televisual narratives. Whether or not web series are a viable path to a career in television, or a unique and lasting production mode, they allow for a degree of exploration and freedom with the TV form that hasn't been possible in the past. Whatever distribution platform television broadcasts eventually migrate to, the fact that increasing numbers of people want to tell stories using the serial, television form suggests that TV storytelling is a central and vital feature of contemporary culture.

Above all, television storytelling isn't static; its rhythms have evolved in response to the web. While traditional TV remains a key reference point of creative inspiration and professional aspiration for many web series creators, projects like the first season of *Husbands* point to the evolution of more "web native" storytelling rhythms. These shifts are not confined to web series alone; the growth of online distribution has expanded the types of stories more traditional episodic television programs can tell. For instance, the forthcoming season of *Arrested Development* (FOX, 2003–2006) will premiere on the streaming video site Netflix as 14 episodes released all at once in May 2013. Instead of

⁵ Henry Jenkins, "In a Social Networking World, What's the Future of TV," *Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/henry-jenkins/in-a-social-networking-wo_b_292014.html

relaying an incremental story that progresses forward in time with each episode, the new *Arrested* season will retread the same events, with each episode taking the perspective of a different character. Viewers can theoretically enter the season with any episode, or stop an episode mid-stream and switch to the perspective of a different character. “The action across the episodes is happening simultaneously,” said series star Jason Bateman. “If I’m driving down the street in my episode and [Bateman character’s brother] Gob’s going down the sidewalk on his Segway, you could stop my episode, go into his episode, and follow him and see where he’s going.”⁶

Instead of having the forward momentum of many episodic television shows, the new season of *Arrested* seems as if it will create an elaborative momentum—providing a deeper dive into the same events from subjective perspectives. It would be hard to imagine such a story format working in a traditional network programming schedule, which naturally lends itself to a forward, incremental momentum simply because episodes are released over a longer period of time. In fact, the new *Arrested* season seems ideally tailored for online consumption, demonstrating one direction in which the web might push serial storytelling. “I think it’s going to redefine what television can be and stories can be and how they’re presented,” said *Arrested* star David Cross.⁷ The shifts that Cross describes wouldn’t be possible without digital distribution.

In the case of *Arrested Development*, the storytelling strategies of a traditional television show have been reworked for Internet delivery. As streaming video sites like

⁶ ‘Arrested Development’ Cast Made Some Sacrifices to Make Season 4 Happen, *Huffington Post*, March 21, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/21/arrested-development-cast-sacrifices-season-4_n_2924665.html.

⁷ Ibid.

Netflix, AmazonPrime, and Hulu increasingly invest in original content—and as traditional TV network distribution continues to move online—the door will likely open to more experiments with storytelling strategies tailored to web distribution. Online series, in sum, are an ideal testing ground for the evolution of television-inspired storytelling.

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